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The Swiss-Serbian Chairmanship of the OSCE: A Trust-Building Agenda

How will Switzerland and Serbia use their upcoming chairmanships of the OSCE to overcome the deep-seated mistrust that exists between a number of participating states? Today, Matthew Rojansky outlines the steps Bern and Belgrade might take to turn the organization into an 'undivided and functioning' community.

By Matthew Rojansky for ISN

In 2009, an independent high-level commission launched the Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative (EASI) under the co-chairmanship of three leading statesmen, former German Deputy Foreign Minister Wolfgang Ischinger, former Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov, and former United States Senator Sam Nunn. The group of more than two-dozen commissioners included a former head of state, senior policymakers, diplomats and businessmen drawn from participating states of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). After two years of intensive work, the Commissioners agreed that the most desirable future for the OSCE "lies in building an inclusive, undivided, functioning community without barriers in which all would expect resolution of disputes exclusively by diplomatic, legal or other nonviolent means." To make this happen, the Commissioners recommended that the OSCE should make overcoming the mistrust that still characterizes relations between Russia and the United States twenty years after the end of the Cold War as its top priority. They also stressed the importance of achieving historical reconciliation and resolving the longstanding local conflicts that plague the region.

The work of the EASI Commission thus underscored the urgent need to reinvigorate the basic understanding that enabled Cold War rivals and a set of neutral or non-aligned states to reach consensus in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. While the region's politics have evolved considerably in the nearly four decades since 1975, the fundamental challenges facing regional security have not. In the run-up to Helsinki+40, during which the OSCE will be chaired by Switzerland (2014) and then Serbia (2015), the EASI commission's insights suggest that participating states must now undertake concrete steps to build an inclusive and undivided security community, on a foundation of mutual trust.

As a political organization governed by consensus, what the OSCE achieves belongs not to the organization as such, but to the participating states. What is possible depends, therefore, on the political will of those same states. Generating such political will, focusing action on concrete and achievable objectives, and following through to sustain accomplishments, are, first and foremost, responsibilities of the Chairmanship in Office (CiO).

What to Expect

From the outset, the Swiss and Serbian chairmanships of the OSCE will be expected to set a strategic direction for the organization, design and implement signature initiatives that advance its core mission, and respond quickly and effectively to crises as they arise. Switzerland previously held the CiO in 1996, and contributed greatly to stabilizing unrest in Albania, while advancing an OSCE framework for arms control. Serbia, on the other hand, lacks such leadership experience and is likely to face special challenges thanks to its position on the periphery of major regional blocs within the OSCE space.

That said, Serbia's position also confers potential advantages, including privileged dialogue with Russia, special appreciation of the need for post-conflict reconciliation, and insight into challenges related to Europe's Eastern periphery. Switzerland can also share insights related to its own successful efforts at conflict resolution, reconciliation, and inter-ethnic cooperation. Not only can Bern help to shape the agenda for the two years leading up to Helsinki+40, it can also support Belgrade's efforts to build a strong leadership capacity for the anniversary year. For both countries, the OSCE CiO presents an unparalleled opportunity to demonstrate the ability to lead and inspire others to achieve real progress on Europe's hardest problems.

The principles of the Helsinki Final Act, which will be increasingly under the spotlight ahead of its 40th Anniversary, calls for a comprehensive understanding of security that includes politico-military, economic and human dimensions. Every previous CiO has launched new initiatives in these areas. However, chances of making genuine progress have been severely hampered by the persistent lack of trust between and among participating states. This distrust, as the EASI Commission recognized, is driven most of all by lingering tensions over history and historical memory.

As two European states which are especially conscious of their own complex histories, Switzerland and Serbia should be prepared to pay special attention to the challenge of building trust through historical reconciliation. With this in mind, Bern and Belgrade must not only address all the institutional priorities of the OSCE, but also guide participating states through processes of historical reconciliation and trust-building. In doing so, the Swiss and Serbian chairmanships might result in concrete advances in conflict prevention, economic growth, and human development across the OSCE space.

Where should the Swiss and Serbian Chairmanships begin?

First, the Chairmanships should draw on their own experiences to reinforce that historical reconciliation between and within societies is a complex and long-term process that will not advance at a uniform or predictable pace. Surveying the OSCE space today, it is evident that reconciliation processes are relatively advanced between Germany and France; underway between Poland and Russia; in infant stages between Russia and its Baltic neighbors and in the Balkans; and frozen in the Caucasus-Caspian region and Central Asia. While the conditions in some states and regions are more obviously "ripe" for successful reconciliation than in others, the OSCE should remind all participating states that reconciliation is an essential first step toward trust-building and full participation in an effective security community. In other words, reconciliation must at the very least become a stated goal for participating states throughout the OSCE space.

Having recognized the practical importance of historical reconciliation to trust-building and enhancement of the OSCE, the Swiss and Serbian Chairmanships should seek to create resources to enhance the capacity of participating states to undertake and manage processes of historical reconciliation. These should include a standing body to offer high-level political support/cover for those states prepared to undertake difficult reconciliation processes, a repository of best practices

drawn from other participating states' experiences, a network to connect non-governmental organizations and individuals engaged in reconciliation and trust-building work across the OSCE, and a virtual and physical archival capacity for participating states.

Political support for first steps toward reconciliation ought to come from respected and high profile political leaders from across the OSCE space. The CiO should invite a group of senior figures—men and women like the EASI commissioners, and figures well-known for their personal roles in reconciliation, such as Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Anatoly Torkunov, or Egon Bahr—to constitute a permanent “contact group”. This group may offer counsel to national leaders who are considering beginning reconciliation processes, or are facing difficulties along the way. In the same way that senior political figures have helped the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) advise participating states on the conduct of free and fair elections, this group could also offer a much needed seal of approval for national leaders who take on great political risk by supporting reconciliation.

To help identify and disseminate best practices, the CiO could also sponsor the creation of an OSCE Center on historical reconciliation, which would offer a neutral platform for interested states and groups to begin reconciliation dialogues—whether on an official or unofficial level. In addition to offering a space for non-governmental groups to participate in “track 2” reconciliation dialogue, an OSCE Center could serve as the central node for a wider network of reconciliation practitioners and stakeholders, which in turn would contribute to the organization’s knowledge base of best practices. The center could also serve as a neutral and safe repository for archival materials related to difficult historical issues or past and present reconciliation processes. Unlike national archives, which are subject to selection biases or limited access for reasons of national security, an OSCE archive should be open to contributions from all participating states, and should adhere only to the highest standards of scholarly integrity in collecting, preserving and publishing archival materials.

Leading by Example

Finally, Switzerland and Serbia should use their chairmanships of the OSCE to inspire other participating states to invest in reconciliation and trust-building. With support from Switzerland, and in recognition of its special responsibility as CiO during the Helsinki+40 year, Serbia could signal its own readiness to undertake concrete steps toward historical reconciliation with its neighbors in the Western Balkans, and between communities within its own borders. Although memories of the region’s bloody conflicts remain fresh, and tensions over inter-ethnic and territorial conflict still run high, Serbia and its neighbors share aspirations for enhanced economic development, security and stability, which are only possible on the basis of trust and mutual respect among neighbors. Indeed, it is precisely because these states and societies have felt the impact of tragic events so recently that they must begin reconciliation processes if they hope to become part of the OSCE security community.

Neither these nor any other efforts should be expected to bear fruit immediately. However, in the subsequent months and years, success might be judged on whether trust has developed within and between states to the point that simple, long-delayed steps can be taken for the benefit of all sides: resolving “protracted conflicts,” opening free trade and travel links, and enabling joint civil society activities in education, health, or cultural fields. The ultimate success of an OSCE-wide historical reconciliation initiative will come with the recognition of an enduring, inclusive security community for all participating states, in which security is understood comprehensively, and disputes are resolved peacefully. Taking the next important steps down this road would be a fitting celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

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[Astana on the Atlantic](#)

[Verified Transparency: New Conceptual Ideas for Conventional Arms Control in Europe](#)

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