

Easing Dialogue Via the OSCE[©]

Andrej Benedejčič, Moscow

It was June 2001, only a few days before the planned first meeting of Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, and the U.S.-Russia summit in Slovenia seemed in jeopardy. The advance teams of both presidents could not agree on how to divide up the rooms in the Brdo Castle, the favorite mansion of the late Marshal Tito of Yugoslavia. The protocol deadlock was only broken when the Slovenian side suggested a solution worthy of Solomon: The east wing of the castle went to the Russians, the west wing to the Americans and the south wing to the Slovenians. The summit took place.

The meeting in Slovenia was marked by bright and sunny weather, which was also reflected in the talks of both presidents. This positive spirit was most clearly expressed by Bush, who is still remembered for saying that he looked Putin in the eye and found him straightforward and trustworthy. Summit participants came away with the impression that they had witnessed the dawning of a new period in East-West relations, characterized by mutual trust and candor.

The events of the past four years, however, have shown that the logic of presidential advance teams in dividing up the Brdo Castle remains sound. The dialogue between Moscow and Washington, for one, has had its share of vicissitudes, reflected most clearly in the changing fortunes of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, chaired this year by Slovenia.

The OSCE, with a membership of 55 participating states, is the largest regional security organization and extends from Canada's west coast to the Russian Far East. The discussions and events that take place in this forum thus reflect the many processes that take place in the Euro-Atlantic space. As outgoing OSCE Secretary General Jan Kubis recently noted: "What is going on in the OSCE is therefore worth watching, because it is a barometer of the political atmosphere in Europe today."

Judging from the current situation in the OSCE, the state of affairs in the area between Vancouver and Vladivostok at the moment is not at all reassuring. The statements at the regular ambassadorial meetings of the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna sometimes even hark back to the bygone days of the Cold War. There is talk of countries belonging to different "blocs," and the general level of distrust is palpable.

The situation is unfortunate not only because the OSCE member states should be concentrating on celebrating a number of important anniversaries this year -- including the 30th anniversary of the signing of the seminal Helsinki Final Act -- but also because the organization as such still holds great promise. Part of this is due to its innate openness and historically induced flexibility. For example, while the Collective Security Treaty Organization -- which unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan -- still regrets the European Union and NATO's lack of responsiveness to dialogue, it cannot say the same about its relationship with the OSCE. The secretary generals of both organizations met in February 2004 here in Moscow. The CSTO secretary general, Nikolai Bordyuzha, was also invited to and took part in the OSCE's 2nd Annual Security Review Conference in June 2004.

The current impasse in the OSCE is primarily due to the dissatisfaction of countries "East of Vienna" with its work. This discontent was most clearly expressed last July, when the presidents of nine countries in the Commonwealth of Independent States signed the Moscow Declaration. Then, in September, foreign ministers from eight CIS countries adopted the Astana Address, which made concrete proposals for changing the OSCE's work. Finally, last December the OSCE was shaken by a financial crisis on account of certain reservations from the Russian side regarding its new budget.

The OSCE's current predicament is regrettable. It is the only regional security organization with established and comprehensive field presence in Central Asia, as well as in some of the most problematic areas of the European continent, including Transdnestr, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia. It is also the only regional organization that takes the holistic approach to security for granted, as evidenced by the political, military, economic, environmental and humanitarian dimensions of its activities.

Finally, the OSCE has taken the calls for its reform seriously. In fact, one of the first measures taken by the OSCE's new chairman, Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, was to establish the Panel of Eminent Persons, which is required to come up with concrete proposals to improve the organization's work by the end of this month. The panel includes a Russian representative.

At a time of dissonance in the dialogue between East and West and their security institutions, the OSCE is a natural forum for discussion of different points of view. After all, the organization was originally created precisely for this purpose. In its current chairmanship role, Slovenia will endeavor to ensure the continued viability of the OSCE, including through discussions regarding how it can function more effectively.

This will allow the organization to continue its important activities and concentrate on new tasks and projects, such as the upcoming seminar on military doctrines and the energy security conference. This will also allow the trusting and candid spirit of Brdo to live on.

Andrej Benedejčič is the Slovenian ambassador to Russia. As an adviser to the prime minister, he was a member of the Slovenian organizational committee for the Bush-Putin summit of June 16, 2001.