

## The OSCE as an Alliance of Civilizations in Action

### *Introduction*

Building, strengthening, and improving the quality of democratic institutions across the OSCE area is a generational challenge facing the peoples and states of the OSCE.

The challenge takes different shapes in different contexts. In some, it is a matter of embedding and strengthening democratic institutions in states where democracy has never established deep roots. It is also that of integrating diversity while ensuring functioning societies and legitimate political structures. This last issue bridges the false notions of “East of Vienna” and “West of Vienna”, and represents an appeal to all OSCE participating States to join efforts. They have indeed done just that. From the Porto Ministerial in 2002 through to the Brussels Council meeting in 2006, the foreign ministers of OSCE participating States have underlined the importance of strengthening tolerance and non-discrimination for the security of the OSCE States and the well-being of their societies.

Increasing attention to this area has been driven by two motors. The first is principle. Promoting tolerance and non-discrimination enshrines one of OSCE’s most fundamental principles, which is to protect the inherent dignity of the human being. A second driver has been the perceived and actual rise of extremism and intolerance as challenges to security. The modern societies of the OSCE are complex, multicultural, highly globalized structures, but in some ways remain very much organized on a national basis. Stereotyping, discrimination of all sorts, marginalization, and a lack of integration have shown that they have the potential to rip apart the fibre of delicately interwoven communities. Such phenomena can lead to anger and resentment that breed hatred and even violence. Thus, integrating diversity while strengthening common values has become one of the most important challenges of our times. The stakes are high.

The international community has realized the importance of the challenge. Most saliently, in 2005 the United Nations Secretary-General established a high-level group of eminent personalities, following a proposal initiated by Spain and Turkey, and tasked this group with generating a report containing an analysis of the rise in cross-cultural polarization and extremism and developing a set of practical recommendations to counter this phenomenon. The high-level group met five times from November 2005 to November 2006, at the conclusion of which it produced a report that takes a multi-

levelled approach.<sup>1</sup> As tasked by the OSCE Ministerial Council's Decision on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination,<sup>2</sup> and in a joint effort by both the OSCE Secretariat and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE contributed a substantial report to the UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative in June 2006.<sup>3</sup> In essence, the argument made in this report was that the OSCE, as an organization of common values and commitments among equals, could itself be considered an alliance of civilizations in action.

The argument was not made lightly. The OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization. It spans three continents, stretching "from Vancouver to Vladivostok". It encompasses major world religions and cultures, and brings together 56 diverse participating States. Despite deep differences, these states have proved able and willing to work closely together to promote stability and security in the OSCE area. They have also elaborated an impressive body of commitments in all three dimensions of security. In the human dimension, OSCE commitments have been underpinned by the principles of the inherent dignity of the human being, human rights, and fundamental freedoms.

This article examines the OSCE's approach to promoting tolerance and non-discrimination. The argument is structured in three parts. The first clarifies some of the principles that have guided OSCE thinking and action in this area. This is followed by an examination of the main pillars of the OSCE framework, the tools employed by the Organization, and examples of activities undertaken. The final section discusses the UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative.

### *First Principles*

Combating discrimination and promoting mutual respect and understanding have always been fundamental parts of the OSCE vision of building comprehensive security within societies and between the participating States. The starting point lies with the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which emphasized promoting the "inherent dignity of the human person". It is worth recalling that the Final Act called upon participating States to "recognize and respect the freedom of the individual to profess and practice, alone or in community with others, religion or belief acting in accordance with the dictates of his own

- 
- 1 United Nations, *Alliance of Civilizations, Report of the High-level Group*, New York, 13 November 2006, at: [http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG\\_Report.pdf](http://www.unaoc.org/repository/HLG_Report.pdf).
  - 2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Ljubljana 2005, *Decision on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding*, MC.DEC/10/05, 6 December 2005, at: [http://www.osce.si/mc-docs/mc\\_10\\_05.pdf](http://www.osce.si/mc-docs/mc_10_05.pdf).
  - 3 Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe, *OSCE Contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations Initiative*, Vienna, 26 June 2006, at: [http://www.osce.org/documents/sg/2006/06/19739\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/sg/2006/06/19739_en.pdf).

conscience.” The OSCE has sought to foster stability within states and to deepen security between them on this foundation of ensuring respect for the human rights and the fundamental freedoms of the individual.

Within the OSCE, fundamental freedoms are taken to include freedom of thought, conscience, religion, belief, and expression, as well as democracy and the rule of law, tolerance, the fight against discrimination and xenophobia, minority rights, and integration. Taken together, these commitments constitute a framework in which people can live in lasting peace free from any threat to security. Linked to this, the OSCE acts continually on the belief that the rule of law and democratic values are the key to building a climate of tolerance inside states as well as around them.

This has meant, for instance, that OSCE participating States have rejected linking terrorism, radicalism, and the recourse to violence with any particular ethnicity, culture, or religion. It has also meant that, for the OSCE, inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue is interpreted as an end in itself and not only as a process. Indeed, only through constant communication, information-sharing, and permanent dialogue can a climate of tolerance be built that will enhance respect for the fundamental dignity of the human being. It is in this respect that the dialogue of cultures matters for security. Participating States have always tried to avoid “securitizing” culture. However, the states also know from more than thirty years’ experience that the vibrancy of societies and cultures matters for the strength of states and the stability of international relations.

Within the OSCE, the security of participating States is seen as being interdependent as well as multidimensional. The first line of responding lies with states, which have primary responsibility for fostering and sustaining a dialogue of cultures, faiths, and civilizations. However, state-level responsibility does not detract from the importance of building a networked approach that includes actors within and below states as well as those above them. The most effective means of addressing a complex and multifaceted problem is by drawing on the strengths of many different actors, including NGOs, state institutions, and other international organizations, such as the Council of Europe and UN agencies. In the past few years, the OSCE has become a platform for innovative co-operation between networks of different actors. Only such a network can assist states to define needs, elaborate commitments, and implement them, through capacity-building activities linked to education and the rule of law and by building local and regional partnerships. In turn, civil society actors of all kinds are vital channels of communication and legitimacy.

OSCE thinking in this area, therefore, is founded on the need to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of the individual. Inside states, ensuring healthy societies and strong democratic institutions are vital channels for realizing this end. Outside, the OSCE has emphasized the creation of

networks for innovative co-operation between multiple actors, including NGOs and other international organizations.

### *The OSCE Approach*

In promoting tolerance and non-discrimination, the OSCE acts at four levels.

First, the OSCE has provided a political forum where 56 states with different cultures, religions, and histories can join to clarify and define among themselves the nature and scope of the problems that arise in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination. Experience shows that defining the problems at hand and elaborating policy responses that can be appropriate for all states are no easy tasks for such a divergent group of countries. Nonetheless, OSCE participating States have reached important decisions at the OSCE Ministerial Council meetings in Porto, Sofia, and Ljubljana. With this groundbreaking objective in mind and also to raise awareness, the OSCE has also conducted five high-level conferences devoted to promoting tolerance and non-discrimination. These occurred in Berlin, Brussels, and Paris in 2004, Cordoba in 2005, and Bucharest in 2007, and also included the implementation meeting in Almaty in 2006.

High-level discussion between the participating States, often including heated debate, has become a vital part of the OSCE approach. Defining the nature of intolerance and the scope of discrimination will be a long-term process that requires ongoing exchange and much patience. However, it constitutes a vital first step, from which a body of commitments for action can be developed. This form of engagement has also been designed to ensure broad ownership of the OSCE's actions and to deepen the legitimacy of the Organization's activities. Ownership and legitimacy are two key ingredients in OSCE efforts to promote tolerance and non-discrimination.

Second, the Organization has acted to build capacity and expertise in participating States to implement the commitments they have agreed to in the human dimension, specifically with regard to tolerance and non-discrimination. In practice, this has translated into multiple capacity-building projects undertaken by the Organization and its institutions, especially ODIHR, with state institutions, legislatures, educational systems, and civil society groups. As discussed below, the OSCE field operations have also had a key role in capacity-building with host governments and societies. Capacity-building activities have included state-level actors and civil society, ranging from educators and young people to legislators and ombudsmen.

Third, the OSCE has developed an important role in monitoring and reporting on the situation in participating States with regard to tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR is particularly prominent in this respect, along with the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (FOM) and the field operations. On the whole, the OSCE relies on consensus rather than coercion

in performing this role. Peer review and monitoring by the institutions and field operations are the main means used to help keep states on track in implementing commitments as agreed and developing new ones in response to changing circumstances. This inclusive approach has worked to ensure a greater sense of ownership and goodwill on the part of the participating States with regard to both the elaboration of OSCE commitments and the undertaking of activities, helping considerably to ensure common action by the OSCE to promote tolerance and non-discrimination.

Finally, the OSCE has sought to develop co-operation with other actors in this field, including NGOs and other international organizations. The idea here, as noted above, is that the OSCE may act best in creating networks for co-operation between states and other actors, such as civil society and international organizations. The 2007 Bucharest Conference on Combating Discrimination and Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding, for instance, was attended by a wide spectrum of civil society actors and NGOs from across the OSCE area along with participating States and other international organizations, including the UNHCR, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, and the League of Arab States. Putting diverse voices together has therefore been a vital part of the OSCE's approach to building co-operative security. In addition, the OSCE has acted as a regional platform for the implementation of initiatives that have been developed at the international level on issues relevant to tolerance and non-discrimination. The OSCE contribution to the UN Alliance of Civilizations initiative is a case in point.

Taken together, action at these four levels constitutes the framework of the OSCE's approach. The OSCE remains a collective body providing a permanent framework for political dialogue among its participating States, conducted on the basis of equality and the free exchange of views. It is also a forum for raising awareness among the participating States on their security concerns. As such, the Organization has developed a broad range of tools and institutions with expertise directly related to supporting tolerance and non-discrimination. The idea here is not to provide an exhaustive survey of these tools, but simply to touch indicatively upon the main OSCE actors in this area.

Given its mandate and structure, ODIHR naturally has pride of place in the OSCE's efforts. ODIHR's mandate has included assisting participating States in implementing commitments reached on tolerance and non-discrimination and supporting efforts to respond to and combat hate crimes and incidents of racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of intolerance, including against Muslims. Tolerance and non-discrimination is one of ODIHR's major programmes, and ODIHR's activities range from education, monitoring, and capacity-building to legislative assistance and the promotion of inter-cultural dialogue.

The office of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) also has an important role thanks to its mandate to identify and seek

early resolution of ethnic tensions. In pursuing this mandate, the High Commissioner has made recommendations on education, language, political participation, broadcasting in minority languages, and policing in multi-ethnic societies – all based on the concept of integrating diversity. The High Commissioner has also developed close networks of co-operation with other international actors in this area, including the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. In this context, the High Commissioner also co-operates closely with NGOs and other members of civil society in the countries where the HCNM is engaged.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is another key instrument designed by the participating States to act in this area. The Representative has been tasked with observing media developments in OSCE participating States, and promoting full compliance with OSCE principles and commitments on freedom of expression and free media. As we have witnessed in the last few years, the media can play a catalysing role – positive and negative – in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has a difficult but vital task.

The main responsibility of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is to enable inter-parliamentary dialogue, an increasingly important aspect of the overall effort to meet the challenges of democracy throughout the OSCE area. Issues related to tolerance and non-discrimination have become more prominent on the Parliamentary Assembly's agenda in recent years.

Responding to political calls for increased OSCE activity in fighting all forms of intolerance and discrimination, three Personal Representatives of the Chairman-in-Office were appointed to combat various forms of intolerance and discrimination. The Personal Representatives have acted to raise awareness among participating States and other actors in the OSCE area and also to catalyse debate on issues relating to tolerance and non-discrimination.

In addition, the Secretariat has acted through its various specialized units and in its role of supporting the OSCE's rotating Chairmanship. The Secretariat's various offices and units, which were created to address economic and environmental matters, conflict prevention, confidence and security building, policing, gender, trafficking in human beings, and action against terrorism, all undertake activities related to strengthening tolerance and non-discrimination.

The 19 OSCE field operations have become a primary tool for promoting common values and agreements and for assisting participating States in their efforts to implement agreed commitments. The mandates of the numerous operations have varied according to the circumstances and needs of the host state, and included multiple activities linked to awareness raising and capacity building with state institutions and civil society.

What does all of this add up to in practice? Weaving all these instruments together, the OSCE has developed multiple means of bridging the gaps

between societies and cultures in order to promote the security of individuals, societies, and states. A few examples may be useful as illustrations.

ODIHR has extensive and innovative programmes and activities to support states in implementing the commitments reached to combat hate crimes on the internet. Certainly, the member states of both the European Union and the Council of Europe – which include many OSCE participating States – have taken legislative steps to criminalize and prosecute the perpetrators of cyberhate. In addition, all OSCE States have committed themselves to examining their existing legislation for its effectiveness in regulating internet content. ODIHR has catalysed work to support states in creating mechanisms for monitoring and reporting online hate. One aspect of ODIHR's strategy has been to encourage the setting up of hotlines or complaints bureaux where members of the public can lodge complaints against offensive internet material.

In the field of education, ODIHR has worked on a project to provide a snapshot of how discrimination and intolerance have been handled in education and to draw up a set of best teaching practices. Other activities include those related to combating racism and discrimination against Roma and Sinti and the many activities undertaken by OSCE field operations (e.g. in relation to the education law in Bosnia Herzegovina). ODIHR has also worked on guidelines for teaching about religions and beliefs in the OSCE area. In addition, many field operations have devoted special attention to youth initiatives. For example, the Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje has implemented a training programme on multiculturalism, anti-bias, and peaceful conflict resolution that targets teachers, school boards, and parents. The Mission in Kosovo has developed youth assemblies, whose main tasks include preventing interethnic tension. In Central Asia, the OSCE has reached out to the youth by supporting summer camps and cross-border camps, and by strengthening academic networks and dialogue.

The activities of the Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the field of education in a multicultural and multi-ethnic country are revealing. Following the development of the Education Reform Strategy in 2002, one of the OSCE's primary objectives has been to ensure that all efforts are focused and co-ordinated. Educational reform has represented an immense undertaking, involving hundreds of local education experts, authorities and NGOs, as well as international agencies. In its activities, the OSCE has drawn on its vast experience in developing public policy, its advocacy capacity, and its strong field presence to help the process of reform move forward and to encourage increased local ownership from the grassroots right up to ministry level. On the whole, OSCE activities have helped to support the development of a more multicultural education system that should be no longer burdened by nationalist politics and which fulfils the educational needs and fully respects the identity and culture of all students.

A fundamental part of the strategy of the HCNM, as of the OSCE as a whole, has been to act in concert with partner international organizations – the United Nations, the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the World Bank, and other donor agencies, as well as international NGOs. Building such a network for co-operation has been an important means of increasing the effectiveness of the HCNM's work, broadening channels of influence, co-ordinating activities, and making better use of available staff and financial resources. For example, the High Commissioner has developed close co-operative relations with the Council of Europe over the years, especially with the latter's Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) and the Venice Commission. Co-operation deepened after both organizations signed a political agreement in 2005 to enhance co-operation. Indeed, "national minority issues" was one of the agreement's four priority areas, and the High Commissioner was appointed OSCE focal point for minority issues within this framework.

Here, we should also note the OSCE's activities in promoting modern policing methods and force modernization in the OSCE area. For example, establishing a strong and credible police service has been one of the major challenges faced by Kosovo. The rule of law cannot be achieved without law enforcement that works for the good of all people and enjoys their trust and confidence. The OSCE Mission, UNMIK, and the Kosovo Police Service (KPS) have worked together to create an effective police force guided by the principles of democracy and human rights, which will continue to play a major role in the reconciliation process. Police training has also complemented the Mission's efforts to help establish rule of law and promote respect for human rights. While UNMIK police assisted with on-the-ground policing and police administration, the OSCE has worked to train police officers according to international human rights and community-based policing standards.

In addition, programmes and activities undertaken within the Secretariat by the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OECCA) and the Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings seek to establish sustainable environmental development and protection and to combat trafficking in human beings, respectively. These all draw on a set of universally recognized values that can be powerful means of uniting people from different groups. OSCE action on gender issues is another example. Women are frequently among the most vulnerable members of society, particularly in conflict situations, but they have also often proven more ready to bridge cultural, national, and ethnic gaps. In this context, the OSCE has acted to encourage women to participate fully and equally in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, and post-conflict rehabilitation.



The Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has developed multiple activities to combat misperceptions, prejudice, and ignorance, including hate speech. The work of the Office has focused on developing responsible journalism and media self-regulation, internet literacy, and on issuing recommendations concerning broadcasting in minority languages (in co-operation with the Office of the HCNM). With regard to media and communications, the FOM has paid particular attention to seeking to strengthen responsible journalism, and to the internet as a major and often polarizing force.

In sum, the OSCE approach marries commitment with practice, bringing together an evolving set of values related to tolerance and non-discrimination with a wide range of activities that are undertaken with the aid of a well-furnished toolbox.

### *The Alliance of Civilizations Initiative*

The OSCE contribution to the Alliance of Civilizations initiative in June 2006 followed the same lines. It reviewed the OSCE's engagement across multiple areas of activity to build and advance tolerance and non-discrimination. The report detailed the range of relevant OSCE commitments in this area, highlighting the OSCE as a framework for promoting tolerance. The report also examined the mandates and activities of the structures, mechanisms, and tools in the OSCE toolbox, including the 19 field operations and the institutions. Finally, the report examined the efforts undertaken by the OSCE in the four priority areas put forward by the Alliance of Civilizations initiative (education, youth, migration, and media).

On 13 November 2006, the high-level group presented its final report to the UN Secretary-General. It defined the *raison d'être* of the Alliance of Civilizations as "the need to build bridges between societies, to promote dialogue and understanding and to forge the collective political will to address the world's imbalances [which] has never been greater".<sup>4</sup> The report consisted of two parts, the first presenting an analysis of the global context and the state of relations between Muslim and Western societies, and the second reflecting the high-level group's view that tensions across cultures have spread beyond the political level into the "hearts and minds" of populations. In order to counter this trend, the report presented recommendations in the four key areas mentioned above.

Follow-up came in early 2007, when the UN Secretary-General appointed the former president of Portugal, Jorge Sampaio, as the High Representative for the Alliance of Civilizations and charged him with leading the implementation phase of the Alliance. On 14 June, Sampaio presented the Alliance of Civilizations Implementation Plan (2007-2009) to the UN

---

4 United Nations, *Alliance of Civilizations*, cited above (Note 1), p. 3.

Secretary-General.<sup>5</sup> The plan provided an overview of the defining principles and key objectives (including developing a network of partnerships with states, international organizations, civil society groups, and private sector entities) of the Alliance of Civilizations and outlined the structure that will support the Alliance's work (including an annual forum). In addition, the Alliance is designed to act as a clearinghouse and a repository of best practices, materials, and resources on cross-cultural dialogue and co-operation projects. A rapid response media mechanism to address cross-cultural tensions will also be established, together with a number of collaborative pilot projects in areas such as media, youth employment in the Middle East, and student exchange programmes.

Clearly, the OSCE's body of commitments and practical efforts is complementary to the UN initiative. The OSCE's continuing focus on issues of tolerance and non-discrimination has led to the development of a political *acquis* that shares much common ground with the Alliance of Civilizations initiative. Indeed, the Organization, thanks to its function as a forum for political debate, the support it provides to states in the implementation of commitments, and the range of its capacity- and confidence-building activities, is already making a substantial contribution in its own region and with its Partners to promoting similar goals. And it stands ready to do more.

### *Conclusions*

The OSCE's comprehensive approach to security is the basic framework for its activities to promote tolerance and non-discrimination. Acting through the institutions and on the ground – whether in Bishkek, Skopje, or Zagreb – the Organization has developed a multifaceted approach to a problem that itself has many faces.

Protecting fundamental freedoms has been at the heart of the CSCE/OSCE project since its inception in 1975, and assisting countries in the transition to democracy has been a central activity of the OSCE since 1990. Today, OSCE States face new challenges to democracy stemming from the need to integrate diversity in a healthy manner in increasingly complex societies. The problem concerns all OSCE States equally. Intolerance, hate crime, and terrorism are creating fear and distrust in multicultural cities and societies across the OSCE area. As already mentioned, stereotyping, marginalization, and a lack of integration threaten to rip apart tightly interwoven communities within the OSCE area, leading to anger and resentment that have bred hatred, or even violence. The so-called “cartoons crisis” that erupted in January 2006 over the publication by numerous media outlets of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad was a case in point. Building tolerance

---

5 United Nations, *Alliance of Civilizations Implementation Plan (2007-2009)*, New York, at: <http://www.unaoc.org>.

and non-discrimination has become central to protecting and enhancing the quality of democracy across the OSCE.

The OSCE has become highly active in this area since 2002. As an Organization of common values among equals that spans three continents and encompasses major world religions and cultures, the OSCE is indeed already an alliance of civilizations in action. On the whole, the OSCE has been led by four goals in promoting tolerance and non-discrimination: First, to clarify “first principles” for understanding the issues at stake, shared by the participating States; second, to build relevant capacities, both at state-level and in society as a whole; third, to monitor and report on developments as a way to support the implementation of commitments; finally, to act as a regional platform for global initiatives.

For the international community, much hard work remains to be done to tackle the challenge of integrating diversity to create effective democracies. The OSCE is ready and willing to continue to play a major role in this key endeavour.