



2021 Annual Security Review Conference

“Back to basics: Our commitments, our security, our OSCE”

Secretary General Helga Maria Schmid

Opening Remarks

Vienna, 31 August 2021

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In today’s polarized and unpredictable security environment, how can the OSCE best contribute to peace and stability? That is the key question for this conference.

Tensions are high in our region, and trust is at a low point. Since the Annual Security Review Conference last convened over a year ago, we have seen increased military activity in some areas, including along both old and new fault lines in Europe. Escalation is a serious concern. The situation in Afghanistan is posing new challenges for that country, especially for its women, but also for its neighbors, and for the larger OSCE region.

At the same time, the pandemic has bluntly reminded us that our security is not only interconnected, but interdependent. We all face transnational and global threats that are too big for any one country or any organization to resolve alone.

Especially in such difficult times, the Annual Security Review Conference offers us an important opportunity to assess the OSCE’s efforts to fulfil its commitments and to address the many challenges we face in the first dimension of security. There are good reasons why the OSCE is mandated to convene this conference every year. The ASRC offers participating States a chance to air their concerns, debate each other, and try to find a way forward together to tackle politico-military challenges affecting our common security. So we should protect and we should promote this conference. This is my plea to all of you. That means, first of all,

ensuring that it takes place, but also providing participating States sufficient time to prepare for it and to enable high-level participation. Let me thank the Swedish Chair, and in particular Ambassador Funered, for their determination in working toward agreement to ensure that we could meet today.

The ASRC gets to the heart of what the OSCE is all about: co-operative security. In other words, our security is not only comprehensive, but also common. So our responses should be common too.

So what can the OSCE do to revive a more co-operative approach to security?

I see three areas in the politico-military dimension where the OSCE could support participating States in taking incremental steps. These include intensifying dialogue, reducing military risks, and rebuilding confidence.

The OSCE is the only inclusive platform for security dialogue in our region. In particular, the State-owned and State-driven Structured Dialogue provides a flexible space for finding common ground on politico-military challenges facing our region. In recent years, our organization has fostered many fruitful discussions on threat perceptions, military doctrines, military activities and deployments. But there is more ground to cover, including transparency, risk reduction and incident prevention.

The OSCE can help to reduce risks by strengthening military-to-military contacts, which increases mutual understanding of different perspectives, helps to identify common approaches, and creates international networks of military officers.

Finding ways to prevent misunderstandings or miscalculations from escalating can help reduce the immediate risks stemming from military incidents. Implementing and further building on existing agreements that have proved to work well, such as the Vienna Document, could help.

Dialogue, risk reduction and de-escalation go hand in hand with transparency and confidence building.

It was no accident that, in the midst of the Cold War, the Helsinki Final Act included the first set of confidence- and security-building measures. With transparency and open communication as their foundation, these measures launched an era of confidence building and fostered stability and security in our region for decades. The courage and commitment of our predecessors, who put aside their differences to work together to prevent a new war, offers us ample inspiration to take steps to reduce current tensions.

Today the Vienna Document is the key OSCE instrument for enhancing transparency, predictability and stability. Ensuring that it remains relevant, reflecting contemporary realities and technologies, calls for engagement by all participating States.

Re-engagement on all arms control and confidence- and security-building instruments should be our common goal. We will all benefit from increased security.

But security is not just about States. What is really at stake is people's lives. Women and men. Children and families. Individuals and communities. We must never forget this.

Earlier this year in eastern Ukraine, I witnessed the devastating impact that conflict has on ordinary people. I saw for myself how restrictions on crossing the contact line make it harder for elderly people to collect their pensions, for students to take their exams, and for humanitarian organizations to do their vital work. Young people I met were concerned that their lack of contact with peers on the other side of the contact line was feeding alienation and reinforcing divides.

Urgent steps are needed to improve conditions for people affected by the conflict. First and foremost, this means achieving a durable and verifiable ceasefire. But it also means mine action, repairing critical infrastructure, removing excessive restrictions at current crossing points and opening new ones.

The OSCE is doing its part. So far this year, the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has facilitated over 600 local ceasefires to enable repairs and maintenance at 72 civilian infrastructure sites benefiting some five million people on both sides of the contact line.

Especially during the pandemic, the SMM needs unrestricted and secure access for its monitors and assets. In the first six months of this year, more than 80 percent of the Mission's long-range UAV flights have encountered significant signal jamming. This must stop.

Achieving a comprehensive ceasefire requires political will. The Normandy Four can play a key role by giving a new impulse to the Trilateral Contact Group, enabling progress toward a peaceful settlement in line with the Minsk agreements. Implementation of those commitments, and points that were agreed at the Paris summit, remain basic and necessary steps.

Political will is indeed key to peacefully resolving the protracted conflicts in our region, along with long-term international engagement. In the Transdniestrian settlement process, we have seen that agreements can be reached and implemented when there are shared interests and benefits. The meaningful inclusion of women at all levels of peace processes is also crucial – and we're very grateful for your support in this respect.

In Georgia, the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism – IPRM – in Ergneti remains a fine example of effective OSCE work, as part of the Geneva International Discussions that we actively contribute to in coordination with our EU and UN partners. As I told participants in the 100th meeting of the IPRM in June, it shows that dialogue and pragmatism are critical to building security and confidence in challenging situations.

Sustainable peace is also key for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Last year's war affected the whole region. The OSCE is still engaged and seeking to contribute through the Minsk Group Co-Chairs and the Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office in particular. We are in regular contact with Ambassador Kasprzyk and I visited his able team in Tbilisi in June. He has a lot of knowledge and experience that he can bring to the peace process, ultimately contributing to security and confidence on the ground. We also hope to advance our programmatic work in all three dimensions based on previous – and possible future – co-operation programmes.

This is encouraging. At the same time, we must also be attentive to risks of instability in other parts of our region to prevent potential crises from escalating.

This brings me to the OSCE's work in the conflict cycle. Over the past decade, we have built up a robust, cross-dimensional toolbox for conflict prevention and conflict resolution. But to remain effective, our tools need to be sharpened and used in good faith to increase transparency, build confidence and co-operation and reduce tensions. But this also depends on you, the participating States, choosing to use and support them.

The tenth anniversary of the Ministerial Council decision to strengthen our toolbox offers an ideal moment to look at how we could adapt our instruments and processes to contemporary conflicts and security threats.

For example, we could explore how to increase cross-dimensional synergies, further mainstream gender perspectives into our instruments, make greater use of technology, and look into ways to better bridge the gap between early warning and early action.

COVID-19 has starkly shown us that no state is immune to crisis. Transnational and global challenges evolve rapidly and will only continue to grow, both building on and feeding instability and conflict. Tackling these threats effectively calls for co-operative and co-ordinated approaches at both the strategic level and on the ground. So we need to work in partnership – with our participating States, with our Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation, and with relevant international and regional organizations.

Technology can help us there. Criminals and terrorists quickly adopt new technologies to advance their activities, but technology can also be used to stop them. The OSCE is well placed to provide a platform for exploring the new technology-security nexus.

In conclusion, I would like to recall the theme of this year's conference: "Our commitments, our security, our OSCE."

Looking further ahead, to 2025, the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act offers an opportunity to renew our commitment to dialogue and co-operative security.

So I urge all participating States to reinvest energy and resources in the OSCE's inclusive platform for dialogue, and to intensify efforts to increase mutual understanding and co-operation.

And I hope that next year's ASRC will have a smooth path to consensus, and that it will take place in normal conditions with full and high-level participation.

Thank you very much.