An Agenda for Human Dignity

Marc Perrin de Brichambaut
OSCE Secretary General

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The debate about promoting democracy continues to beat strong, and for good reason. If in the early 1990s democracy seemed triumphant across the globe as the single most legitimate and effective form of governance, this may no longer be the case. International relations feature today a handful of countries with rising international influence, growing capitalist economic systems, but whose form of government is not democratic. In some, the trappings of democratic form are maintained, while the substance of politics is quite different. More countries today pay allegiance to democracy, but its spirit is not spreading inexorably through the world.

These circumstances raise a difficult question: how to continue to support democracy in countries and regions where the notion is challenged and resistance is growing?

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has something unique to contribute to this debate. First, because the OSCE played a key role underpinning democratic transformation in Eastern Europe in the 1990s and it remains active today across wider Europe. The OSCE has supported societies undergoing difficult transitions and it has helped build legitimate institutions in war-torn regions. As importantly, the OSCE has even longer experience in promoting the essential value that democracy is designed to promote – the inherent dignity of the individual, as embodied in his or her fundamental freedoms and human rights. The OSCE has pursued what might be called a 'human dignity' agenda since its creation in 1975 as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). At a time when democracy itself faces challenges, it is worth remembering essentials.

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Since 1975, the OSCE has developed a solid foundation of commitments regarding the protection of the inherent dignity of the individual. It has also developed a useful toolbox for helping the 56 OSCE states implement these commitments.

The Helsinki Final Act was signed in Helsinki in 1975 by a group of thirty-five countries, ranging from Austria to Yugoslavia and including the US and the USSR. In the Final Act, these states pledged to 'promote and encourage the effective exercise of the civil, political, economic, social, cultural and other rights and freedoms, all of which derive from the *inherent dignity of the human person* and are essential for his free and full development.'[1]

The Final Act was a complex package of compromises struck between the antagonistic blocs. Nonetheless, the Final Act's commitment to the dignity of the individual became a powerful platform for advocating change in the Soviet bloc. The US and its European allies pressed the Soviet Union to ensure human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedoms and the right to freedom of movement. The tone was set at the first CSCE Follow-up meeting Belgrade in 1977-1978, when individual cases of violations were raised. Dissident groups sprung up all across the Soviet bloc inspired by the principles developed in the Final Act.

According to one of its drafters, the US diplomat John Maresca, the content of the Final Act created a 'vast political and historical dimension of opportunity.'[2] The space became filled with content once the context had changed sufficiently inside states and across Europe. The CSCE did not change the USSR; the USSR itself changed. Still, the unremitting focus on the inherent dignity of the human person helped till the ground for that change.

'Democracy' itself made it onto the agenda of the OSCE when change in wider Europe was gathering speed. This happened at a meeting in Copenhagen in June 1989, when states agreed that 'pluralistic democracy and the rule of law are essential for ensuring respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms.'[3]

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[1] On the negotiations of the Final Act, see Jacques Andréani, *Le Piège, Helsinki et la chute du communisme* (Odile Jacob, 2005), Andrei Zagorski, *The Helsinki Process* (Human Rights Editions, 2005), as well as John J. Maresca, *To Helsinki, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1973-1975* (Duke University Press, 1985).

[2] John J. Maresca, 'The CSCE at its Inception: 1975 in Myth and Reality,' *Helsinki Monitor*.

[3] *Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE* (June 29, 1990).

During that meeting, states also spelled out the institutional components of democratic governance -- underlining the role of free and fair elections, an independent judiciary, and representative government to ensure that individual fundamental freedoms were respected.

The November 1990 summit in Paris was a crowning moment when the changes that were occurring and the values that had accompanied them were enshrined at the highest level.[4] The Paris Charter placed democracy itself at the heart of the OSCE process: 'We undertake to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations.'

On these foundations, the OSCE has developed a varied toolbox to assist states in protecting fundamental freedoms and human rights and strengthening democratic institutions. Today, the OSCE has 19 field operations deployed across the OSCE area with mandates to support states and their societies. The Organization has also a central Secretariat and specialized institutions that provide targeted assistance – the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. In practice, the OSCE works across the spectrum – for instance, by helping states strengthen independent judiciaries, monitor media freedoms, build democratic police forces, and ensure the protection of human rights in the struggle against terrorism. The OSCE is also pushing to settle unresolved conflicts in the former Soviet Union, it is active across all of Kosovo, and it provides a key forum for building trust in military affairs across wider Europe.

At the heart of all of these activities, there remains the principle that security and democracy starts with the 'inherent dignity of the human person.'

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In Central and Eastern Europe, the vision embodied in the Paris Charter was a remarkable success. The decade that followed the end of the Cold War saw the region's transformation. With the EU and NATO, the OSCE was vital in underpinning this historic change. In other parts of wider Europe, however, progress has been more uncertain.

[4] *Charter of Paris for a New Europe* (Paris: November 19-21 1990).

Major reforms have occurred in South-Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union to consolidate state institutions and build new political systems. But the conditions have been difficult, featuring devastating wars in the Western Balkans and conflicts further east. Events in Georgia since November 2007 and Armenia after the presidential elections of February 2008 highlight the challenges still facing democratic consolidation -- even when major advances have been made.

The challenges to fundamental freedoms and human rights have mutated with time. For instance, the jailing of journalists for political reasons was a key threat to freedom of the media in the OSCE area. Today, problems arise more from the abuse by the authorities of the very legislation that was put in place to protect the media. Also, the business of media has changed dramatically; stubborn independent media voices have great difficulty today finding employment in some countries.[5]

In some countries, the experience of the 1990s, often associated with severe domestic economic hardship and the undermining of traditional social structures, has soured perceptions of 'democracy' as a practice of government. In Russia, former president Vladimir Putin often presented the 1990s as period of chaos and weakness -- not to be repeated. In some countries, authoritarian forms of rule have even arisen.

Some actors within the OSCE have started revisiting the practice in the field of election observation that was built on the 1990 Copenhagen commitments.[6] The challenge from Russia and some of its partners in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) has focused on the legitimacy of existing practices in the field of election observation – a flagship OSCE activity. These tensions led the OSCE to decide not to send an observation mission to the Russian parliamentary elections (2007) and presidential elections (2008) because of restrictions placed on the size, duration and freedom of movement of the planned team.[7]

Insecurity remains deep in parts of the OSCE area. The break-up of the former Yugoslavia is still running its course, and conflicts remain unsettled in the former Soviet Union. As long as first-order questions of statehood remain, providing

[5] For information about the activities of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, consult www.osce.org

[6] See *Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE*, Copenhagen, June 29, 1990.

[7] For more information on OSCE methodology for election observation, short and long term, consult: www.osce.org

for fundamental freedoms will remain a fraught process in these regions, and democratic consolidation will be difficult.

In addition, all OSCE states face the challenge of integrating diversity into increasingly complex societies. Intolerance, hate crimes and terrorism are creating fear in our multi-cultural cities and societies. Stereotyping, marginalization and a lack of integration may rip the fibres of inter-woven communities, leading to the anger and resentment that breeds hate, even violence.

The UK Foreign Secretary, David Milliband, stated recently that 'since the millennium, there has been a pause in the democratic advance.'[8] Wider trends have an impact on the OSCE area. While the vast majority of states around the world are now rooted in a nominal sovereignty of 'the people' and most retain the external trappings of democratic governance, the onward march of liberal values that seemed self-evident a decade ago is no more. The combination of apparently sustainable economic growth with various shades of authoritarianism may be becoming to some leaders an increasingly attractive alternative.

All of this means that issues of individual dignity and democracy remain high on the agenda of wider Europe.

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The OSCE human dignity agenda is tried and tested. It may not be the fastest or the most radical path, but it is one where the basics are not forgotten and where patience is married with perseverance. Since 1975, through the Cold War and after its end, the OSCE has proven its ability to foster change peacefully and resiliently.

Reaffirming an insistence on the 'inherent dignity of the human person' offers an inclusive platform upon which to build deeper co-operation between states and within them, with the long term objective of supporting and strengthening democracy. Indeed, the perspective provided by the 'human dignity' agenda, based on the rich body of commitments shared by the OSCE participating States, is already central for the OSCE in tackling new challenges, such as promoting human rights in

[8] David Milliband, 'The Democratic Imperative,' St Hugh's College, Oxford University, February 12, 2008.

counter-terrorism and strengthening tolerance and non-discrimination.[9] This agenda also guides OSCE rehabilitation activities in the conflict zones of Transnistria, Moldova and South Ossetia, Georgia. It is the same insistence on protecting the dignity of the individual that inspires OSCE action in the fight against the trafficking of persons. The point is that the OSCE promotes the inherent dignity of the human person in specific and not abstract terms. In practice, this has meant, for instance, addressing the fate of journalists in Azerbaijan, clarifying the fate of prisoners in Belarus, and advocating the rights of Europe's marginalised Roma and Sinti population. Working in parallel with structural support to democratic institution-building, the combination is powerful.

Since 1975, during the Cold War and after its end, the OSCE has developed useful operating principles for promoting human dignity and supporting democracy in a fully complementary way. A first principle reflects the need to create consensus. In the field operations and across the OSCE area, the OSCE seeks to work with the grain of local conditions to craft with elites and societies greater political space for protecting human dignity and consolidating democracy. This is not easy, and it takes time.

A second principle is patience married with perseverance. The transformation of Eastern Europe in the 1990s saw all good things coming together at the same time. The speed of this success should not detract, however, from the historical patience that may be required in other parts of wider Europe. The Helsinki Final Act and the process that followed were visionary in framing the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, but also patient in their expectation for success.

Finally, the OSCE has a comprehensive approach. Promoting the dignity of the human person and democratic institutions are *part* of a package -- not the package itself -- designed to build security in wider Europe through work also on 0political-military transparency and economic and environmental good governance. The OSCE focus is not exclusively state-orientated -- civil society in the widest sense, including NGOs and professional groups, has a vital place. The starting point of the OSCE remains as radical as it was in 1975 – that genuine and comprehensive

[9] For information on OSCE activities in the struggle against the trafficking in human beings and the fight against terrorism, see www.osce.org/atu and www.osce.org/cthb

security begins at the level of the individual and their fundamental freedoms and human rights. It is on this foundation that a long lastingly secure wider Europe may be built

In the heated political debate about the pitfalls of promoting democracy, the human dignity agenda ensures that fundamentals are not left aside. Protecting human dignity is the objective; democratic institutions are the means.