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Kyiv Ministerial Held Amid Protests; Switzerland Takes on OSCE Leadership as Situation In Ukraine Deteriorates

By Helsinki Commission Staff

OSCE MINISTERIAL ADOPTS DECISIONS

On December 5 and 6, 2013, Kyiv hosted the 20th meeting of the Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe while hundreds of thousands of protestors occupied Maidan Nezalezhnosti, Kyiv's central square. Although as 2013 OSCE Chair-in-Office, Ukraine had successfully shepherded a package of decisions to adoption in Kyiv, the meeting was dominated by demonstrations taking place throughout the country triggered on November 21 by the Ukrainian government's suspension of preparations to sign integration agreements with the EU (see below).

Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland represented the United States. She began the Ministerial by meeting with civil society activists, which she described as her "most important event" in Kyiv. In her opening statement at the Ministerial, she highlighted three "worrying trends" in OSCE participating States: the persecution of journalists, the rising intolerance of minorities, and "democratic backsliding" into restrictive laws and practices that violate civil liberties.

In the human dimension, decisions were adopted on:

- Improving prosecution, protection and prevention in the fight against trafficking in human beings.
- Building OSCE efforts to improve the situation of Romani people in the OSCE region.

- Advancing freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, including the protection of places of worship and religious sites.

The Russian Federation was effectively isolated in its refusal to join consensus on a decision on protection of journalists.

In his closing remarks, Ambassador Daniel B. Baer, Head of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, reaffirmed U.S. support for the people of Ukraine in their struggle for freedom and prosperity.

CIVIC SOLIDARITY PLATFORM HOLDS PARALLEL CONFERENCE; DISPATCHES FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY OBSERVERS IN KYIV

Prior to the start of the two-day Ministerial, NGOs convened a parallel civil society conference to focus on human dimension and conflict resolution issues. The long-scheduled conference took on additional challenges as violence was used against nonviolent protesters just one day prior to its opening.

While continuing with the planned program, the Civic Solidarity Platform also:

- organized an ad hoc committee among the NGOs to focus on the unfolding developments in Ukraine;

- dispatched approximately 40 participants from the parallel conference to go with local NGOs as freedom-of-assembly observers to prevent or diffuse provocations; and
- established a contact group to visit both the Ministry of Interior as well as protest organizers.

In an “Appeal by the OSCE Civil Society Parallel Conference on the Situation in Ukraine,” NGOs called for the OSCE Ministerial to take place without having the level of representation lowered, urged the Ministers to take a firm position on the human dimension crisis in Ukraine, and called for the OSCE participating States to create a “group of experts” to follow up on events in Ukraine after the Ministerial.

MINISTERS SIGNAL SUPPORT FOR EUROMAIDAN

Initially peaceful demonstrations in Kyiv took a turn for the worse on November 30 and December 1, with violent attacks on protestors by security forces and thugs which claimed scores of victims, including journalists. On December 1, hundreds of thousands of protestors on the Euro-Maidan and tens of thousands more throughout Ukraine demanded signing of the EU Association Agreement, the government’s removal and accountability for those responsible for the violence. The massive protests reflected Ukrainians’ increasing frustration with growing corruption and the deterioration of human rights and democracy under the rule of President Victor Yanukovich.

On the eve of the Ministerial, Commission Chairman Sen. Ben Cardin urged Ukrainian authorities to immediately investigate reports of use of force by police and state-sponsored thugs and ensure respect for fundamental freedoms. He also urged OSCE Ministers to act in support of Ukrainian democracy.

The United States, Germany, Sweden, Croatia, Latvia, the Netherlands, and Canada were among those countries whose high representatives visited the protestors on the Maidan and spoke forcefully in defense of freedom of assembly and freedom of expression. In her statement, Assistant Secretary Nuland unequivocally expressed support for the people of Ukraine who see their future in Europe, based on shared OSCE values and principles.

OSCE CHAIR PASSES TO SWITZERLAND FOR 2013, SERBIA 2014

In an unprecedented move, the OSCE participating States decided in 2012 to name Switzerland as the Chair-in-Office (CiO) for 2014 and Serbia as CiO for 2015, with the understanding that Switzerland will continue to exercise Chairmanship responsibilities concerning OSCE activities in the Balkans in 2015. The creation of a tandem chairmanship was intended to improve continuity in decision-making as well as allay concerns about Serbia’s ability to steward the international organization with regard to OSCE activities in the Balkans given its own national interests in the region. The two countries announced a joint work plan in July 2013.

As CiO for 2014, Switzerland will select the subjects for the three Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings. In addition, Switzerland will have the task of forging consensus among the participating States on the agenda for the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting and other human dimension work of the OSCE.

Switzerland will also organize several “chairmanship meetings” – i.e., meetings that are convened in addition to those mandated by previous agreements adopted by the participating States. A conference on trafficking in human beings will be held in Vienna on February 17-18, 2014. Switzerland has also announced plans to hold a cross-dimensional meeting on counter-terrorism and human in Interlaken, April 27-28, 2014.

Reflecting Bern’s desire to involve civil society in its work, Switzerland will also organize four regional workshops with representatives of NGOs, academia, and think tanks. The workshops will be held in South-Eastern Europe, Southern Caucasus, Central Asia, and in Warsaw and will lay the ground for the civil society conference to be held in December 2014 in parallel with the next OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in Basel in December.

High on the Swiss agenda will be the deteriorating human rights and security situation in Ukraine, the direct consequence of the Kyiv’s violations of its OSCE commitments.