

Early this year, you have spoken optimistically enough about the Prague Process for the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement, in which Armenia and Azerbaijan are involved. On what is your optimism based and how deeply are you informed about the essence of the so called Prague process?

I am following closely developments within the Prague process. Very recently I discussed this issue with the Co-Chairmen of the Minsk Group. As you know, the Prague process takes place under the aegis of the Co-Chairmen. I understand that the Foreign Ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan are engaged in a constructive dialogue and this has potential to bring about substantial progress in the talks.

Nagorno Karabakhi officials, representing 140 000 Armenians in this region, frequently state about the need of their direct participation in the talks. Azerbaijan is categorically against this. Don't you think that the peace process will not give any considerable results without resolving this fundamental contradiction?

The ultimate responsibility for the settlement of the conflict lies with both parties. The OSCE's role is to facilitate the peace process. The OSCE will therefore support any framework for talks on the settlement of the conflict which will ensure progress and is agreed to by both parties.

Azerbaijan regularly criticizes the OSCE Minsk Group, accusing it of "being inert". Why does the OSCE listen to such accusations instead of indicating Azerbaijan on the need to return to agreements reached in Paris in Kew West in 2001 by the mediation of the USA, Russia and France, when the parties were so near to the signing of the peace agreement?

The task of the OSCE Minsk Process is to provide the parties with an appropriate framework for dialogue aiming at conflict resolution. The OSCE Minsk Group since its establishment has been working hard together with the sides to move the peace process forward. However, the Minsk Group can only promote dialogue and peace together with both parties. A settlement of the conflict can only be achieved if both parties are convinced about the benefits of the peace agreement. The OSCE stands ready to support them in the search for such a peace agreement.

Armenia and Azerbaijan constantly discuss the methods of conflict settlement. Official Yerevan speaks for the "package" resolution of the conflict, whereas Baku adheres to the "stage-by-stage" resolution, which suggests returning the occupied territories and only then considering the status of Nagorno Karabakh. Which of these two approaches, in your point of view, is more realistic?

We hope that the process of talks between both parties will lead to a rapprochement on this issue and that agreement will be reached on the basic parameters of the peace process.

International organizations including the OSCE urge upon the countries of the region to develop regional cooperation, stressing that this will assist to the settlement of conflicts. In their turn, countries of the region and Azerbaijan in particular, state about the impossibility of such cooperation until the resolution of conflicts. How do you imagine the way out of this impasse and how is it possible to make the leaders of the countries of the region demonstrate the necessary political will?

I agree that increased regional co-operation would be beneficial for the Caucasus. We hope that the countries of the region will build upon the present activities of a transboundary character and will agree to launch new initiatives for the benefit of the peoples of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The OSCE, together with the UNDP, UNEP and NATO is already implementing some cross-border activities. For example, we are very satisfied with the results of the Caucasus River Monitoring initiative and hope that the Environment and Security Initiative will be equally successful. We stand ready to propose new activities of a similar character.

Armenian officials say that the European Union should raise the issues of opening the border with Armenia and recognition of the Armenian Genocide in the context of starting the talks on Turkey's accession to the EU. How does the government of Slovenia react on it?

Slovenia has always supported the inclusion of Armenia in the European Neighbourhood Policy. I believe that it can take advantage of the enlarged Europe, thus creating opportunities for closer relations with the EU. In this context we assess positively the recent recommendations of the European Commission and agree with the approval of the proposed guidelines and speedy beginning of negotiations for the adoption of Action Plans, which have to consider characteristics of individual countries and be adapted to their needs. I also welcome the determination of the Armenian authorities to implement the required reforms and face the challenges seriously. Slovenia will help Armenia in its drawing closer to the EU to the best of its abilities.

Don't you think that the European Union makes a moral mistake considering the problem of the Armenian Genocide only in the political and not humanitarian context? In April 2002, you visited the Memorial of victims of the Armenian Genocide in Yerevan and stated that you would order the Slovenian experts to study the problem of the Armenian Genocide of 1915. What was the experts' opinion about it?

When I as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Slovenia visited Armenia three years ago, President Kocharian said that Armenia still had some unresolved issues with its neighbours. An important part of this complex issue is represented by the Armenian-Turkish relations. I agree that the history of each nation is very important; every nation should know its history and respect it, but each nation also wishes better future. We should therefore not forget the wider context of Turkey's drawing closer to the EU, which has a positive impact on both Turkey and the entire region. I believe that Turkey's relations with the Caucasus countries - including Armenia - will be put in a new framework, which will improve opportunities for overcoming unresolved historical issues.

Armenia was among those CIS countries which criticized the OSCE in a statement last summer. Did Armenia come out with constructive proposals on reforming the OSCE afterwards?

We are in regular contact with the representatives of the Armenian government, in particular with the Head of the Armenian Delegation to the OSCE. We appreciate this co-operation and constructive proposals of Armenia on issues pertaining to OSCE activities.

Judging by the publications in international media, there is an impression that the events in Georgia and Ukraine became the "watershed" which strengthened contradictions between Russia and the OSCE. Do you agree with the viewpoint that Russia treats the post-soviet area and the South Caucasus in particular as its "backyard" and that it should stop this practice?

Russia plays a very important role in the Caucasus and is also an OSCE participating State. For instance it is actively involved in the international framework for the resolution of the three conflicts in the region, i.e. Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. Therefore, the Slovenian Chairmanship deems it necessary to co-operate closely with Moscow on issues related to the region.

You represent a country which has successfully overcome the transition period and become EU and NATO member. The South Caucasian states started to carry out reforms about 15 years ago. However, they are still far from approaching the level of countries of "New Europe" and especially the developed Western Democracies. What is in your mind the main reason for failures?

There are significant differences between the three countries, but in general I could say that we support the strategic choice of democratic reform made by the South Caucasus States. We follow closely their efforts in the field of legislative reform. This is the basis for a dynamic development. However, what is equally important is the implementation of new laws. Here, improvements are still possible.

More attention in the region could be paid to strengthening the civil society and particularly to ensuring its active involvement in reform efforts. A vibrant civil society is a necessary element of democratic developments.

I think that a more active fight against the scourge of corruption would also be very important.

And last but not least, I believe that without settlement of the conflicts in the region, real prosperity will not come to the South Caucasus. For instance, as long as these conflicts are not solved, the traditional economic links in the region will not be restored and the potential for foreign investments will be hampered. The problem of refugees and IDPs will not be resolved either and we know what a burden this is for the economies in the region.

It goes without saying that the OSCE stands ready to continue supporting Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia on all these issues.