

It should have been a year of renewal for the OSCE under Slovenian chairmanship.

But the modest steps towards a refocusing of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe achieved this year were overshadowed by the clash of incompatible and inflexible visions held by Russia and the United States.

The dispute came to a head at the 5-6 December ministerial summit in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana.

AGREEING TO DISAGREE

The main disagreements were over Russia's slow troop withdrawal from Moldova and Georgia and the possible overhaul of the OSCE's main election-monitoring body, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR).

For the third year in a row the summit ended without a ministerial declaration, which traditionally has been a politically binding blueprint for the organization's actions in the coming year. Instead, the chairman-in-office, Slovene Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, had to close the session with his own political declaration, a statement that carries no political weight for the member states.

The OSCE was established in 1995 as a successor to the Cold War-era Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The OSCE's decisions are adopted by consensus and are not legally binding on the participating states. For the chairman-in-office, bridging the gaps among 55 member states (the OSCE is the world's largest regional organization) is a Herculean task that doesn't always end in success.

This proved true again this year.

When Slovenia took over the presidency, the OSCE was in disarray. The 2004 Bulgarian chairmanship tried to accommodate both Moscow's and Washington's concerns, but its efforts came to a halt after Bulgarian Foreign Minister Solomon Passy received an angry letter from then-U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell that action regarding the OSCE should be "considered carefully."

Many of the countries of the former Soviet Union criticized the OSCE for being unbalanced in September 2004. The members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) stated that the OSCE attached too much importance to the human dimension while neglecting the political-military and economic-environmental parts of the organization's mandate.

Their strongly-worded statement also accused the OSCE of double standards in election monitoring. In the view of the CIS states, the OSCE was too tough on elections in the successor states of the former Soviet Union while neglecting irregularities in the West.

Russia pushed for a major reform of the organization, which the U.S. administration opposed – not least because a weak OSCE better fits its foreign policy agenda. "The organization is relevant for the U.S. administration only at those times when it can be used for [Washington's] own policy goals," a high-level OSCE diplomat told TOL in an off-the-record comment.

In a sense, Russia's concerns over election monitoring are understandable since the "color revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan all broke out after OSCE monitors declared elections in those countries to be flawed and not meeting democratic standards.

Moscow's sphere of influence is gradually shrinking in Central Asia and the Caucasus as both regions have become a new geopolitical playground for the superpowers. While the United States is gaining a foothold on former Soviet territory, Russia is trying to maintain good relations with its remaining friendly satellites.

In this difficult international climate Slovenia's desired "triple R agenda" of reforming, rebalancing, and revitalizing the OSCE was a tall order all along.

In early 2005 a commission of seven eminent people was established to prepare reforms for the organization. By June they had produced around 70 recommendations, from which the participating states had to pick those for which consensus could be reached.

The OSCE's future financing also had to be agreed during the year. This had already become a stumbling block between Russia and the United States at the 2004 ministerial council in Sofia.

MOSCOW'S NEAR ABROAD

While these achievements were perhaps just a small step away from irrelevance, a new path for the organization had to be determined at the Ljubljana summit. Yet even before the delegates sat down at the conference table, it became clear that any breakthrough would be a miracle. Washington's and Moscow's positions on a number of issues had not changed over the previous 12 months, and the OSCE was running the risk of deadlock again.

As the delegates started presenting their speeches at the plenary session of 5 December, a long night of negotiations on the wording of the final declaration had already passed without progress.

Two sticking points were threatening the outcome of the summit.

First, the U.S. and Russia disagreed whether the ministerial declaration should include a reference to the Istanbul commitments of 1999, where OSCE members agreed to reduce their military presence in Europe. In effect this meant that Russia would have to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Moldova. Moscow made it clear that a reference to the Istanbul commitments was a no-go while Washington stuck to its guns, explaining even before the summit that there would be no final declaration if the commitments were not included.

Closed-door negotiations followed. High-ranking Slovenian diplomats told TOL that Russia was more willing to compromise than the United States. A compromise wording was found for the case of Georgia, admitting progress had been made this year towards full implementation of the Istanbul commitments. Georgia and Russia reached a bilateral agreement in May 2005 that the remaining Russian forces in the country would be withdrawn by 1 October 2007.

However, an unbridgeable divide remained over Russia's military presence in Moldova. Russia claims that its forces are still in the country because of the unresolved Transdniester conflict. The Dniester region, run by Russian-speaking groups with close ties to Russian interests, declared independence from the new state of Moldova in the early 1990s. The two sides engaged in a brief civil war in 1992 and were separated by Russian forces.

Most OSCE participating countries wanted the Ljubljana ministerial declaration to call on Russia to fulfill its Istanbul obligations regarding Moldova.

U.S. Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns told reporters on 6 December, "I think all of us are ready to praise the work done by Georgia and Russia together.... There has been progress on Georgia." By contrast, he said, "There has been no progress on Moldova. In fact, there's been no progress since December 2003 in terms of reductions of the Russian force, which is about 1,500 men, and the Russian equipment in Moldova."

Burns told journalists, "And if we do not have a [ministerial] declaration it is because we're not willing to trade principle for a document. The principle is much more important than a ministerial declaration. The principles have to endure. The ministerial declaration fades away as soon as you write your stories."

In the wee hours Burns was still hoping a deal could be reached, yet that hope was more rhetoric than substance. In the end no consensus on Moldova was found, and the summit ended without a ministerial declaration.

Speaking at a press conference after the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the Moldova pullout was an "artificial issue." According to him, Russia had made it clear that it was prepared to commit to a pullout of its troops from Moldova. "This is subject to the conclusion of negotiations on the withdrawal between Russia and Moldova that were suspended in 2003," he said, stressing that the OSCE was not the right forum for resolving the issue.

A COLORED VIEW OF ELECTIONS?

The second major point of disagreement between Moscow and Washington was Russia's attempt to effectively strip ODIHR of its autonomy.

The election-monitoring body has been the subject of particularly harsh criticism from Russia, which has accused it of using double standards. Many states of the former Soviet Union agree with Russia.

Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokaev, whose country was the latest to be criticized by ODIHR over its 4 December presidential elections, told the OSCE conference on 6 December that its presidential ballot had been "free, transparent, and honest – the best ever."

For the international community the latest election in Kazakhstan was a test for the country's bid to chair the OSCE in 2009.

Moscow wanted to put ODIHR under the supervision of the OSCE's Permanent Council. Under the proposal, the council would have had to approve all ODIHR final reports on elections, in effect giving every country a veto over its observations since council decisions taken by consensus.

Washington wanted ODIHR to remain as it was. Burns called it the "gold standard in election monitoring."

The summit did approve an overall reform document, although one without much substance, merely asking that several difficult issues be "reviewed." And it was adopted only after Russia agreed to a Belgian compromise that ODIHR would have to prepare a report on its work that will be put up for debate at the next ministerial summit.

The road map for reform also calls for the OSCE to review the possibility of becoming a full-fledged organization with its own legal personality, another demand by Russia, and to examine ways to strengthen the role of the secretary general and upgrading the operations of the secretariat.

The document also suggests that the current consensus-based decision-making should be preserved, while urging efforts to build a greater sense of common purpose among the 55 member states.

It seems that the dispute on ODIHR's work is off the table – for now. But sooner or later the dispute will have to be resolved. New controversy is almost certain to arise in 2006, when several elections in the CIS area are due to take place.

Despite the shortcomings of the summit, the chairman-in-office sounded cautiously optimistic on the future of the organization.

“There is no excuse for the systematic failure to live up to the responsibilities to which we've committed ourselves,” Slovenian Foreign Minister Rupel said. “OSCE participation cannot be a free ride. It's above all an effort at sharing responsibilities and commitments.

“Tolerating grave breaches undermines the credibility of the OSCE in the eyes of those who count on us most – our citizens. If we lose their ear and their trust, I am afraid we've lost our cause and purpose,” Rupel told his colleagues.