In the late 1960s, one of the main aims of the foreign policy of the Soviet Union was the convening of a conference on security and cooperation in Europe, in which all European states would participate. The NATO countries looked at this proposal with suspicion — they felt that the main aim of Moscow was to ensure Western acquiescence in the permanent division of Europe in general, and of Germany in particular. Gradually, however, Western attitudes changed. Partly this was due to the new Ost-politik of Willy Brandt which led to a normalization of relations with the German Federal Republic, the USSR, Poland and Czechoslovakia. Final Western acceptance came when an agreement was reached with the Soviet-Union on Berlin which provided better guarantees for the position of the United States, Britain and France in that city, and when the Soviet Union agreed to the opening of a conference on mutual and balanced force reductions in Central Europe.

In the preliminary stages of the conference, Western states pressed for the inclusion in the Final Act of a chapter on human rights, and also on detailed provisions regarding the free flow of persons, ideas and information between East and West, in the hope that such arrangements would make the iron curtain less impenetrable.

The results of the Helsinki summit at the end of the European conference were widely viewed with much suspicion. An editorial in the New York Times of July 21st 1973 concluded ‘Never have so many struggled for so long over so little’ and warned against euphoria in the West.

Scepticism was especially strong regarding the human rights provisions in the so-called Basket III of the Helsinki Final Act. Looking back, Henry Kissinger, referring to their role as a rallying point for reformers in Eastern Europe like Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia and Lech Walesa in Poland concluded that Basket III accelerated the collapse of the Soviet empire. In this respect, he also paid tribute to the human rights activists in NATO countries writing ‘… without the pressures which they exerted, progress would have been slower, and there probably would have been less of it’.2

The Helsinki summit decided that there would be follow-up conferences. The first two of them, in Belgrade (1977-1978) and in Madrid (1980-1983), took place before the collapse of communism in Europe, and produced very few concrete results. Western attempts to ensure the full implementation of the provisions of the Final Act regarding the free flow of persons, ideas and information failed because of the strong opposition of the Soviet bloc. In 1989, the first of a series of three annual

---

1 Max van der Stoel has been OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities from 1 January 1993 until 1 July 2001.
2 Henri Kissinger, Diplomacy, pp. 759 & 760.
conferences on the human dimension of the OSCE was held in Paris. Again little progress was made, but with reports coming in on a weakening of communist power in Central and Eastern Europe, there was a general feeling that the human dimension conference of 1990 would be more productive.

By the end of 1989, communism had collapsed in Eastern Europe. In Moscow Gorbachov was determined to follow a more liberal course. The effect on the Copenhagen human dimension conference in 1990 was striking. A document was adopted with several provisions which would have been immediately vetoed by the communist regimes in the years before. Especially noticeable were the provisions regarding national minorities — provisions which were also used as a model by the drafters of the Council of Europe framework convention on national minorities.

After the rich harvest of Copenhagen, the 1991 Moscow human dimension conference produced fewer and less spectacular results. However, one highly significant provision was accepted. It stated: ‘they (the participating states) categorically and unequivocally declare that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participant states and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the states concerned’.

This provision — adopted without reservations by all states participating in the OSCE — is of vital importance for the work of ODIHR and the High Commissioner on National Minorities. The involvement of these institutions in specific problems of a participant state constitutes an implementation of this rule.

The decade following the collapse of communism in Europe and the falling apart of the Soviet Union constitutes perhaps the most successful period in the thirty-year history of the CSCE, later renamed OSCE. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, created in 1991, has played an important and effective role, especially in the field of international observation of the electoral processes in various OSCE states. The mere presence of these observers helped to encourage many governments to take active steps to prevent election fraud, and the comments of the election teams have helped governments to find more effective ways to do this. According to most observers, experience has shown that the office of the High Commissioner on national minorities has played and can play a useful role in diffusing potentially dangerous interethnic conflicts. As far as the OSCE missions in various states are concerned, the governments of participating states have not always proposed sufficiently qualified candidates for this work, but on the whole it can be said that these missions have often made significant contributions to the search for the solution of specific problems which various states were facing. Last but not least, the OSCE played an important role as a major forum for the discussion of East-West relations. As time passed, however, the establishment of regular NATO-Russia and European Union-Russia consultations has diminished the role of the OSCE as a forum for East-West discussions.

The thirtieth anniversary of the OSCE on August 1 will almost coincide with the publication of a report by a group of eminent persons charged with making suggestions regarding the future of the organization. It is no secret that this group