Living Memory - 30th Anniversary of the Charter of Paris for the New Europe

The Absolute Maximum for its Time

Interview with Ambassador Jerzy Maria Nowak

Ambassador Jerzy Maria Nowak is a Polish diplomat. He was a member of the Polish delegation that negotiated the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and the Charter of Paris in 1990.

In this interview, he describes the road that led from Helsinki to the negotiation of the Charter for a New Europe in Paris in 1990. He reflects on the significance of the Charter and its legacy for the present day. He spoke with former OSCE researcher in residence Jan Brodowski.

Jan Brodowski: Could you please give a general overview of Poland's participation in the CSCE's development from a conference in 1975 to an organization, the OSCE, in 1994? How did you come to be in the group of people that participated in this process?

Jerzy Maria Nowak: Poland´s participation in the CSCE was not easy. Europe was still divided in two blocks and Poland was within the Warsaw Pact and *de facto* Russian satellite. The idea to have the Helsinki process was very positively met in Poland. After all Poland was more liberal in contacts and cultural practice with the West than other members of the Warsaw Pact. MFA was charged with the preparation for the forthcoming negotiations and a group of young people in the Ministry was enthusiastic about the new challenges. A new generation, including myself and Adam Rotfeld, who

worked in the Foreign Ministry's Department of Studies and Programming, were chosen to join the CSCE delegation as part of an effort to rejuvenate our diplomatic service. I tried to co-ordinate the relevant institutions, such as the Ministry of Culture, and other governmental institutions as well as some groups of independent thinking people. This included some very young people, such as Marek Grela and Adam Kobieracki who later became ambassadors. It was a conscious effort to bring in new blood.

We all hoped that something new might be born. However, due to the limitations of our allies at the time – let's call them that, whatever this alliance may have been – we didn't actually have much room for maneuver in our negotiating position. We were told – it was a verbal instruction – "try not to confront the West, but be careful not to confront the Soviet Union, further on you should take care of principle to respect our frontiers and develop commercial and other contacts ".

Dealing with "the Soviets'', as we called them then, was not a simple matter. They reserved for themselves any possibility of a new solution and were not happy with a Polish delegation which was preparing the same new ideas and new proposals. They were rather to see "allies" as those who only supported the Soviet position. We tried to come up with some new ideas. For example, at the Belgrade CSCE meeting a proposal was prepared by a Polish delegation calling for the return of illegally taken works of art during World War II. They considered that this was aimed primarily at the Soviet Union. We explained that it was about Germany, that it did not concern them. Even today I still remember the shouting when we introduced our intention to propose it: "Comrade Nowak is wrong. The Polish delegation is wrong".

The Soviet delegation complained to Moscow that the Polish delegation was departing from arrangements under the Warsaw Pact. This caused a stir in

Warsaw, which, interestingly, did not pass through the official channels between Poland and the Soviet Union, but rather through party channels. A high party representative from Moscow came to Warsaw and presented complaints to the then Head of the Foreign Department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Ryszard Frelek, and others. The accusations were directed against at least three people: Ambassador Professor Marian Dobrosielski, the head of the Polish CSCE delegation, Rotfeld and myself. Well, this was really a problem, so Deputy Foreign Minister Józef Wiejacz was sent to Belgrade to rectify the situation. I remember that one of the diplomats of the Hungarian delegation, with whom we already had quite cordial contacts, told me: "you know, if we had such a situation, I would have been fired immediately. The fact that you are still here is quite an unusual thing in itself". The situation was de-escalated by Deputy Minister Wiejacz and we were asked to be more cautious and less vocal.

On the other hand, we were considered to be the delegation in the socialist camp most capable of understanding the Western position, and we had very cordial relations, especially with neutral countries such as Finland, Austria, Sweden – and Yugoslavia, which still existed at that time. All in all, the meeting in Belgrade was quite interesting from the point of view of what happened there, and when we returned, Ambassador Dobrosielski was appointed Deputy Minister and we, Rotfeld and I, received high state medals for our contribution to the CSCE.

You mentioned neutral countries with which Polish dialogue during the conference was successful. Which delegations were for the Polish delegation the best to co-operate with? How did these relationships work out?

The best co-operation was with the Swedes and the Finns. We also started to establish good relations, first of all, with Germans, which was not easy, and with the French delegation. It was more difficult with the American delegation, because Warsaw was keeping an eye on us. Among the NATO countries, it was interesting that the co-operation with the British was good. They were not as ideologically "pumped up" as the Americans. With the British, you could, on the basis of so-called common sense, discuss some things. From our point of view we were constantly being tested by the British as to how far we were willing to go, what we would do and so on. We had reached a certain degree of confidentiality in our relationship with them.

We were the only delegation in the socialist bloc, the Warsaw Pact, that was very involved in social contacts with Western delegations. Others were afraid. For example, the delegation of the German Democratic Republic did not enter into such contacts at all, and neither did the Czechs. The Czechs were in a very difficult position at that time because they were ordered to support only the Soviet Union. The western countries saw us as a promising, reforming element that might, over time, be helpful in developing the CSCE.

Was the 1990 summit meeting in Paris, which resulted in the "Charter of Paris for a New Europe", a way to formalize this dialogue?

Yes, it was, no doubt about it. We were meeting in a different strategic situation during the negotiation of the Helsinki final act. Poland already had non-communist Mazowiecki government. Similar situation was with Hungary and Czechoslovakia. It was clear that the GDR would soon be swallowed by West Germany. However, you could already sense something, for example, from my contacts with the Russians – because I had these contacts, at least at the ambassador level – but also with deputy ministers and others. You could already sense that they were saying: "what are you

enjoying here? Do you think it will go on like this? Now we have to stop. This is the maximum. We won't go any further. We will no longer show ourselves inferior to the West here. Because what we've done is make a concession." They said in Russian "мы потерпели победу" – it could be translated as "we suffered a victory" in Paris. It was a signal that Moscow is considering deterring the Helsinki process and not allow it to develop. These critical remarks at the lower level were different from those presented by Gorbachev. It was immediately clear that we must go in the direction of institutionalizing the CSCE. And we did go in this direction, up until 1994, when we finally completed the process in Budapest [of transformation to the OSCE], very carefully, with some Russian reluctance.

Looking back, do you think that the Paris document was well prepared? That it was well negotiated? Was there anything else that could have been achieved?

At that time, it was the absolute maximum. And the idea was to develop these institutions, "to build interlocking institutions" [in Europe]. The idea had a chance, but then the Russians said: "that is not interlocking institutions, but inter-blocking institutions", so things went in a bad direction.

Were there topics that could have been included in the Paris document, but ultimately did not make it?

JMN: Well, the further development of the so-called humanitarian and social dimensions. The next meetings, especially in Copenhagen, where to go further towards achieving enhanced cooperation in the field of human rights and democratization.

The delegation that put up the greatest resistance to negotiations, made them difficult – are you able to name such a delegation?

Well, actually, it was the Soviet delegation – at that time. The one that was still resisting, within the framework of the CSCE, was Romania, which at that time, with Nicolae Ceaușescu as President, did not want any opening. Initially, the West had high hopes for their separate position in the Warsaw Pact itself. This did not work out for the West. So, I think it was mainly the Soviet delegation that blocked any new ideas here.

Do you remember any particular incidents or personalities from this negotiation process?

There was the Soviet ambassador Yuri Dubinin. He was one of those very good diplomats, very professional, but he blocked the development of the OSCE process. The evolution of another high-ranking Soviet diplomat, Lev Isaakovich Miendielewicz, was interesting. A man of Jewish descent, probably the last one in this Soviet diplomacy. They got rid of all people of Jewish descent. Miendielewicz became a man who strongly promoted the development of the OSCE.

I will tell you an anecdote. It was the end of 1988. There was a meeting of the Warsaw Pact, at the level of ambassadors and directors of the ministries of foreign affairs, in Prague. Miendielewicz, a head of the Soviet delegation, was a natural dean of the group. Seven delegates were sitting at the table. When Miendielewicz addressed me publicly in front of everyone: “Comrade Nowak, what do you think of Wałęsa's [Lech Wałęsa, leader of the Solidarity movement] future will look like?”. It was not such an easy question for me, because it was then that Wałęsa was being harassed and treated as “just a citizen”, but I managed to take a rather bold tone. I said, “You know, today it's hard for me to say, but the fact is that his career is not over, that he will still play a role. Starting with the trade unions themselves and then maybe more.” He reflected for a moment and said: „Well, I will tell you that I think he will

soon be the president of Poland." It was 1988! There was silence, all the colleagues were terrified. It was turned out that his remarks must have reflected some thinking that had already taken place in the Kremlin at the time.

Looking at the Paris Charter in retrospect, what worked and what didn't? What was successful and what can be considered a failure?

It succeeded, I would say, in the declarative sphere. It actually went quite far. But in the sphere of specifics, there was already a blockade.

From the Polish perspective, the early 1990s marked the beginning of systemic changes in our country. How did this affect our priorities in the process of the institutionalization of the CSCE, its transformation to the OSCE?

The events in our country basically created a very good atmosphere and a good position in international relations. We were desired as a conversation partner. We were consulted everywhere. Except that some negative sentiments related to the CSCE and the OSCE began to appear under the surface in Poland. The failure of the August coup changed the thinking in Poland. The Soviet Union began to be treated as an unpredictable state and NATO became an object of interest. The CSCE was put aside. Some people in the Polish MFA hinted at those who were engaged in the CSCE process which *de facto* weakened the security of Poland. When Bronislaw Geremek took the office of the Foreign Minister he introduced the proper balance between entering NATO and to develop the CSCE transformation process.

Would you agree that Poland's active membership in the OSCE was a step towards our Euro-Atlantic integration?

Absolutely. I think that is a valid assessment. And it really worked. I remember that minister Geremek appointed me as his representative as the chairman in office of the OSCE in 1998. I traveled with him on business trips or alone to the member countries. And I remember that after each stay in different countries, I was still on the plane preparing a short page or two in English, which we sent to our delegation at the NATO headquarters and it was met with great appreciation.

Let's go back to the beginning of the 1990s. Between 1989 and 1995 Poland had five governments, three ministers of foreign affairs. How did these changes affect your professional activity?

We were left with quite a lot of freedom. For many years objectives regarding Polish security were untacked during government changes. It was a silent understanding between leading politicians in the country. All the more so as people began quite quickly to look at our prospects in the European Community and at our prospect of joining NATO. At the same time, we were left with a fairly free hand in the CSCE/OSCE. And we really played a role there. It became a factor that strengthened our position in Europe and NATO.

In your memoirs, you recall the figure of Krzysztof Skubiszewski, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and you emphasize that despite all the changes of the political system that were taking place in Poland, he focused on concept of proper position of the state in international relations.

He really focused on two things. The first was to free Poland from the ties in the Warsaw Pact. In my memoirs, I write about the events in which I participated. The second was to settle the German problem and get the Germans to finally recognize the border. The CSCE was a bit of an aside for

him. He came to Vienna and gave a speech, was quite well received, but the CSCE was not a priority for him.

It's 1991. The Warsaw Pact ends in July. In December, the Soviet Union collapsed. How does this affect Polish activities? How are Poles acting internationally?

We got the signal to be careful. We made no declarations. We waited for developments. We kept correct contacts with the Russians all the time. Of course, they were annoyed that we had withdrawn from the Warsaw Pact, but they accepted it as a result of Gorbachev's policy. Later they became more critical of it all. At that time in the CSCE we followed the path of maximum caution, while maintaining the principle that we participate in the institutionalization and construction of the OSCE, of all the instruments, the High Commissioner and so on.

How has our diplomatic service changed in the context of the changes taking place in Poland?

Our diplomatic service was changing under Minister Skubiszewski, who told me during a personal conversation that he decided to introduce the following measures: one third of the team would have to leave. Who was it? It was mainly those who, according to him, collaborated with or were at the same time functionaries of the security service, or had previously collaborated to some extent. And who declared themselves supporters of martial law in Poland. The second group were people he thought could co-exist for a while, but that they had to be given the option of leaving the foreign office freely without any problems. The third group could remain. These were diplomats who were evidently very professional and not engaged politically.

Coming back to the institutionalization process of the CSCE: how did Warsaw become the headquarters of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)?

JMN: That was the result of the efforts of the Polish team in the OSCE in Vienna. We worked towards it very hard. In Warsaw, the idea of creating this was very well received. Although financial issues were also a question as well as location. I made people aware in Warsaw that we needed a building here – such were the difficulties –, but the Polish side turned out to be very open towards the OSCE. They also agreed to it quite quickly.

Other countries – the Hungarians, the Dutch – were keen on hosting the headquarters of ODIHR, too. We obtained permission quite quickly. It came true. I used the argument that we did not have such an institution in Warsaw, so it was agreed that it would be ODIHR.

You mentioned our first OSCE Chairmanship in 1998. In 2022, Poland again took the lead in the OSCE. Do you see in the activities that were carried out during this second term the influence of our previous OSCE experience? How do you assess our role?

The Foreign Minister, Zbigniew Rau, was not ready to meet with Kobieracki, Grela, myself or any of those who had participated in previous activities. In spite of we offered to meet. Generally speaking, on the official level, there was no interest.

How do you assess the Polish OSCE Chairmanship?

I don't see any great achievements. I estimate that it found itself in an extremely difficult situation due to the war in Ukraine.

As you yourself have noted, we are in very difficult times – the war in Ukraine, the disruption of the security system in Europe. How do you assess the future of the OSCE from a broader perspective?

The future of the OSCE is rather unclear. It depends on how events develop and whether, after these events, we will be able to arrive at a situation where some pan-European action can be taken. There is no certainty here, because the OSCE is pan-European, in cooperation, of course, with the United Nations, NATO and the European Union. The strongest supporters are the Germans: they would be ready to participate in such a new construction of Europe, on a slightly new basis, taking into account the achievements of the Paris Charter, because they also often refer to it. I believe that there are a lot of elements in the Charter that could be useful, but in more favorable international conditions.

We have two narratives in the OSCE. Russia's justification for starting military operations and the narrative of the Western world, which presents the facts as they are. With these divergent narratives, is the Organization able to lead to a positive solution?

Not now. I am one of those who believe that the OSCE should survive present difficulties. Even if it will be in a dormant state for limited time as a result of international events, the war in Ukraine and the development of the situation in Russia. But when things improve, because let's hope that things will change, then we can have a thaw in which this idea of yet another institution to unite Europe may have a future. But today it is difficult to define the framework of that.

Could the OSCE have done something differently in the case of Ukraine? The signs of rising tension were quite clear. Could the tragic events we are witnessing have been prevented in any way?

I don’t think so. The OSCE did not have the instruments that could have been used at that time and place. I would not blame the OSCE in this case.

You mention that the OSCE will have to reformulate its role. What would you suggest?

One would have to think about how to take into account the interests of the great powers so that they have a say in this process. It is mainly about the European Union, the United States and Russia – and let's say Great Britain, because it left the EU. At the same time, one would have to think about the nature of co-operation of the OSCE with the European Union and NATO. Co-operation with and the involvement of the United Nations should not be difficult.

What kind of diplomacy will we need to implement a new formula, if there is a will to accept it?

Here, good multilateral diplomats are needed, some of whom have appeared in this process, who have United Nations and the EU experience. This group of people, rejuvenated, should be included into the process rapidly. If there is to be a change, we will need to prepare a team of young professional teams. At the same time, we need new ideas on how to build it all. Especially those so-called dimensions of the OSCE concerning humanitarian matters, human rights, freedom of information and other freedoms. Everything that depends on how the international and particular European situation will evolve.

You mention young people – how should they be prepared? More broadly, what could the OSCE and the OSCE Secretariat do to build a better future?

For now, the OSCE could stimulate thinking by discussing these topics, which could be summarized, and from which different conclusions can be drawn later. And wait for the development of events.

Wait?

Yes, anticipate and build conceptual foundations of what may be in the future.

Prepare for reform or for construction in a new formula?

Let's hope to see reconstruction of the new formula taking into account the past experience.

Thank you for the conversation.

This interview is part of the oral history project "Living Memory - 30th Anniversary of the Charter of Paris for the New Europe", an extra-budgetary project conducted by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s Documentation Centre in Prague headed by Ambassador Irena Krasnicka. The project envisages intergenerational dialogue based on memories of diplomats who attended the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)'s Paris Summit in November 1990. The interview was conducted on November 18, 2022 in Warsaw at the Library of the Center for Eastern Studies by Jan Brodowski, Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, who was OSCE researcher in residence in June-August 2022.

Find out more from Jerzy M. Nowak in his memoirs: Dyplomata na salonach i w dyplomatycznej kuchni, Warsaw 2014.