PROJECT CO-ORDINATOR IN UKRAINE

Ukraine and the OSCE

Productive partnership in projects

The establishment of the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (PCU) in June 1999 ushered in a new form of co-operation between the OSCE and the Government of Ukraine. It came in the wake of the successful completion of the tasks of the OSCE Mission to Ukraine in Kyiv and its branch office in Simferopol (November 1994-April 1999). On the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the PCU, Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj sat down with Patricia N. Sutter, Editor of the OSCE Magazine, to provide an overview of the Organization's latest joint initiatives with Ukraine.

Patricia N. Sutter: How is the office of the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine different from most of the OSCE's operations in the field?
Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj: Firstly, our mandate does not require us to carry out any political reporting. Of course, I still have to follow the political situation closely, at least to the extent that it has an impact on our work.

Secondly, our efforts are fully concentrated on projects — planning, implementing and monitoring them. This is the sole focus of the office, and we want to make sure the projects we undertake are well managed and effectively delivered. Even if we're exchanging ideas with potential partners all the time, the projects should always be initiated by Ukrainians, whether it's government ministries and agencies or NGOs.

Every single one of our projects is directed either towards helping the country fulfil its OSCE commitments or towards bringing its laws and institutions closer to what a modern democratic society needs to function well. Ukraine has clearly spelled out its intention to integrate itself into European structures. In this context, its implementation of OSCE commitments, also promoted through the projects and activities of the Project Co-ordinator, remains an important endeavour.

What were your immediate priorities for the office upon arriving in Kyiv?

The first few months were quite challenging. One of the first things we did was to restructure the management tree, which was too vertical. Now the Project Co-ordinator, the senior project manager and the chief of the Fund Administration Unit make up a first layer, and we have introduced a second layer of eight mid-level managers, all of whom are Ukrainians.

It's a very good team but we needed to improve the flow of information. We have started meeting more regularly, three times a week, to discuss strategy and exchange views.

Depending on the approval of the 2009 budget, I have also proposed that we set up a project

Kyiv, December 2008. Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj, OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (middle row, centre) with some of his team of three international and 45 national staff. In 2008, the PCU had a portfolio of 24 projects funded by voluntary donor contributions. The proposed unified budget for 2009 is €2.8 million.

management cell — a small group of people who will be responsible for ensuring that our project managers comply with OSCE project management guidelines. Over four days last year, we were trained by the Programming and Evaluation Support Unit of the Secretariat's Conflict Prevention Centre in planning and managing projects relying on the methodology used throughout the OSCE.

Another priority was to increase the transparency of our operations *vis-à-vis* Vienna — the Secretariat as well as the participating States. The practice was to report twice a year to the Permanent Council, but some delegations felt that this was not frequent enough. We came up with a compromise solution: I now report four times a year — twice in Vienna and twice on the spot to bilateral embassies in Kyiv.

I also set out to co-operate more closely with our host country, especially with the Foreign Ministry, which, according to our Memorandum of Understanding, is *the* Ukrainian institution that approves all our projects. We now hold discussions with them at least every three weeks.

And then of course we're continuing our close interaction with our international partners, from the bottom up, especially with the Council of Europe and the European Commission. This way, we complement each other's efforts and avoid duplication.

What tangible results are Ukrainians expecting from your long-term, three-pronged project to help strengthen the country's election process?

This donor-funded project has a budget of more than €5 million, making it the OSCE's largest undertaking in the country, after the mélange-disposal project (see page 17), and one of the Organization's largest extra-budgetary projects.

We're co-operating with the Central Electoral Commission on the project's main component, which is the creation of a centralized electronic registry of voters. This is something that the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has long been recommending.

We have recently completed the tendering process for the necessary IT equipment. Once it is delivered to Ukraine in the spring, work on the registry can start and it should be ready for use in the next regular presidential elections.

The second component is also in response to an ODIHR recommendation — drafting of a unified election code. We are co-operating with a parliamentary group on this task. Since the country's current electoral legislation is already largely in line with democratic standards, the aim is not so much to change it as to pull various strands together into one legal framework that addresses all kinds of polls.

After the election code is adopted and enforced, we'll proceed to the next component — training of about 82,000 election commissioners.

How are you addressing the gender aspect in electoral reform?

Unfortunately, the representation of women in the *Verkhovna Rada* (parliament) is only about 7 per cent. We're trying to make the Ukrainians more aware of the imbalance and helping them find ways of tackling it, but of course without imposing a particular system.

How does your new anti-trafficking project fit into the overall scheme of activities in this area?

In 2007 and 2008, we supported a study to find out how the Ukrainian authorities and the whole network of social and legal services could best improve their efforts to identify trafficked persons, protect their rights and enhance their access to assistance in the framework of a national referral mechanism. This led to a three-year project aimed at putting the mechanism in place in co-operation with NGO partners and the Ministry of the Interior.

This is a concept that's being actively promoted under the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings. It should also make possible a more realistic assessment of the scale of the problem, since the whole process — from identifying victims to helping them reintegrate into society — will be better co-ordinated.

The new project will also help improve legislation and the capacity of the Ukrainian authorities to identify and assist trafficking victims. Initially, in 2009 and 2010, the activities will cover two regions, and later on, we will apply this experience at the national level.

How are you transferring expertise to Ukrainian institutions to ensure the sustainability of projects?

The OSCE is not going to be in the country forever, so a gradual handing over of tasks to Ukrainian institutions and the NGO sector is always uppermost in our minds.

One example to illustrate this is our project aimed at the social adaptation of former military service personnel discharged as a result of the reform of the Ukrainian armed forces. Every year since 2004, we've been supporting the re-education of about 1,000 of the men and women who have been affected across the country. We target the training with a focus on certain skills and professions. For example, a group of former military pilots and engineers have been trained to be part of an airborne fire-fighting division qualified to handle emergencies.

Because of the small size of the groups and the well-focused and results-oriented approach, which targets sectors of the economy where there are employment opportunities, the success rate has been quite high. So far, about 85 per cent of the people trained have managed to find jobs or start a small business within three months after completing the courses.

The OSCE Project Co-ordinator used to finance all training costs, but Ukrainians are now gradually

An ammunition depot near the village of Novobohdanivka, in Ukraine's Zaporizhzhya region, eastern Ukraine, 21 August 2008. Officials from Ukraine's Ministry for Emergency Situations show Ambassador Lubomir Kopaj some of the equipment provided by the OSCE to help clear the area of unexploded ordnance (UXO).

Background. In September 2004, Ukraine asked the OSCE's Forum for Security Co-operation for assistance in carrying out an action plan to address the consequences of the fire that had broken out at the ammunition site on 6 May 2004, detonating some 56,000 tonnes of ammunition over several days.

This led to the "Novobohdanivka project", funded by Belgium, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia and the United States.

The project, completed in September 2007 in the framework of the OSCE Document on Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, has significantly strengthened the capacity of the Ukrainian Government to clean up the unexploded ordnance that was littering the ammunition site and its surroundings.

starting to "own" the project. I recently had the pleasure of taking part in the graduation ceremony of a group whose training was for the first time financed by the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine. This was a small but significant step towards self-sufficiency.

Just about a month ago, our NGO partner wasn't very happy when they found out that we could not support them forever, but suddenly they started becoming more resourceful and creative in finding ways of sustaining their activities.

You're also supporting the capacity of the civil sector to take a more active part in building Ukrainian society. How are these activities making a difference?

Ukraine's civil sector is relatively strong, but everyone feels it could be more self-sufficient and independent of government and business funding and foreign donations, enabling it to truly represent its own interests. So far, with the support of Denmark, we've been helping NGOs through micro-grants and training in fund-raising as part of a comprehensive three-year project in five regions.

But we would like to take this further by creating a better climate for self-sufficiency, and we've been brainstorming with representatives of NGOs and the Government. There are a lot of good models out there that can serve as an inspiration for Ukraine. As a Slovak citizen, for example, I have the option to direct 2 per cent of the taxes I pay the Government to any civil society organization of my choice.

How does the country's domestic political situation affect the work of the Project Co-ordinator?

Of course political developments in the host country can influence one's working environment. The fact that, for example, the *Verkhovna Rada* was not able to take decisions last year affected our work. Through different projects, we had assisted in the preparation of a couple of legislative drafts and if parliament doesn't work, then drafts are not adopted.

Since many of your projects, especially the larger ones, depend on donor funding, how concerned are you about the impact of the global financial crisis on your work?

So far, we have been in the position of having more willing donors than we have projects. I believe that aiming for good-quality results in our projects is the best way to avoid being the target of funding cuts, because donors see for themselves where their money is well invested.

One can tell that you are finding this first field assignment with the OSCE fulfilling and challenging. What makes it special?

The people! When I first came into contact with the OSCE by way of ODIHR election observation missions, I was impressed with the staff's high level of professionalism, combined with a strong human element. I was not disappointed when I came to Ukraine.

How do you envisage the future of the office of the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine?

I don't have a crystal ball, but I can say that right now there is a big demand for our assistance from our partners, who continue to draw our attention to new project ideas, for example, to help prevent xenophobia and hate crimes, fight corruption and ensure the independence of the judiciary.

Our vision is to help the country confront these serious challenges as well as we can and then to hand over full responsibility to Ukrainians when they are ready to tackle them on their own.

Ukraine is a fascinating country and I feel very optimistic about its future. Its biggest potential may not be underground, it's "on the ground." — the millions of dedicated, well-educated, patriotic and hard-working Ukrainians who keep the momentum going.

Lubomir Kopaj, from Slovakia, took up his post as Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine in April 2008. His engagement in OSCE issues started in 1984, when he was a member of the Czechoslovakian delegation to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Stockholm. Through the years, he has led a number of ODIHR election observation missions. Ambassador Kopaj has held a number of senior posts in the Slovakian Foreign Ministry and served as Ambassador to the Netherlands from 1997 to 2000.

OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine
16 Striletska Street, office 55
Kyiv - 01034 Ukraine
www.osce.org/ukraine (in English)
www.oscepcu.org (in Ukrainian)

Establishing administrative justice

Key to securing human rights

Judge Oleksandr Pasenyuk (left), Head of the Higher Administrative Court of Ukraine, and Judge Mykhailo Smokovych at a court hearing. "If it were not for the important lobbying role of our international partners, including the OSCE, Ukraine would not have been able to establish its system of administrative justice," says Judge Smokovych, who also conducts training for other judges.

Transformation of a society's deeply ingrained attitudes and practices does not come about overnight, even if the goal is clearly service of the greater good. A case in point is the attempt to cultivate a culture in which citizens can challenge the decisions of the State when they feel that their rights have been infringed by government rules, regulations, orders or decisions.

BY OKSANA POLYUGA

Undaunted by the enormity of the task, the Ukrainian Government launched a system of administrative justice in 2005 enabling citizens to question decisions or omissions of State authorities — from local and national officials to the President — by filing a complaint in an administrative court.

"This concept is taken for granted in most parts of the world, but was a completely foreign concept in our country until recently," says lawyer Oksana Syroyid, a National Project Manager in the Rule of Law Unit of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine.

"The judicial review of administrative decisions did not — and could not — exist in Soviet times," says Ihor Koliushko, Chairman of the Board of the Centre for Political and Legal Reforms, a Ukrainian NGO. "At that time, decisions issued by official representatives were considered perfect in every way and were not to be contested or questioned by anyone."

While the Government was setting up the courts — so far numbering 27 regional courts, 16 courts of appeal and the Higher Administrative Court — the OSCE Project Co-ordinator, represented by Oksana Syroyid, started assisting a working group to draft the Code of

Administrative Court Procedure. In July 2005, the Code entered into force, spelling out how individuals, organizations, businesses and other legal entities could go about appealing official decisions.
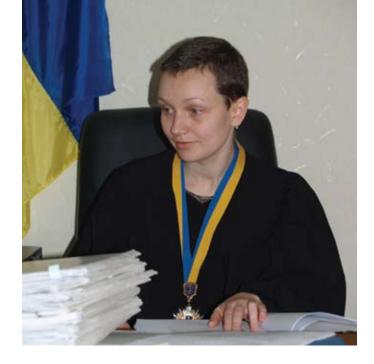
LANDMARK

"The introduction of the Code was a landmark development, but of course that was only the beginning," says Ms. Syroyid. "Clearly, it entailed much more than a mechanical application of methods and techniques."

In the first place, massive efforts were needed to reach out to hundreds of judges, many of whom had undergone academic training under the Soviet system or whose backgrounds were in civil and commercial law.

"Judges had to be convinced that it was within their power and authority to review government decisions," Ms. Syroyid says. "They also had to be made aware of the national and international legal instruments at their — and the plaintiffs' — disposal. And, of course, to underpin all this, judges had to understand the concept of human rights and have respect for it."

"The greatest challenge facing newly appointed judges is not merely to grasp the whole notion of administrative justice, but also to put it into practice," says Judge Olena Holovko of the Regional Administrative Court of Dnipropetrovsk, in the country's industrial south-eastern region.

Responding to this concern, the OSCE Project Co-ordinator called on the same national experts who had drawn up the country's Code of Administrative Court Procedure to design a comprehensive training programme combining conceptual, theoretical and practical elements. Since 2005, about 570 judges, including those representing the Higher Administrative Court,

Judge Olena Holovko of the Regional Administrative Court of Dnipropetrovsk: "Promoting administrative justice is a vocation."

The two unrelated cases described may seem mundane, but they vividly illustrate the changes wrought by the introduction of an administrative justice system in Ukraine. In both administrative court cases, the judges found the authorities of State bodies to have been in violation of basic human rights — an outcome that would have been unthinkable a few years ago, when the courts lacked the instruments and the authority to protect the rights of groups and individuals.

Representatives of a local body of authority in Dnipropetrovsk, a large industrial city in south-eastern Ukraine, went to an administrative court to restrain an NGO from gathering at the city park on grounds that this would pose an inconvenience for vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

The city's Regional Administrative Court referred to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and to the principle of reasonableness and the right to be heard.

The Court found the claim of the local authorities "unreasonable", pointing out that the NGO had been in compliance with the requirements for peaceful assembly. The Court also accused the officials of not taking appropriate action "to ensure the defendant's right to participate in the decision-making process" by, for example, suggesting other alternative locations where NGOs could gather.

An Afghan national filed an application for refugee status in Ukraine. Referring to the country's legislation, the Migration Service rejected the application on grounds that the asylum seeker fell short of proving well-founded fears of being persecuted in his own country.

The asylum-seeker contested the decision in the Regional Administrative Court of Kyiv. After considering the case, the Court obliged the migration authorities to reconsider the application and to interpret the Ukrainian legislation, taking into account international legal documents such as the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and similar cases heard by the European Court of Human Rights.

The Court noted that "the fear of being persecuted" was an assumption that had objective grounds, but that physically verifying it could put the person's life at risk. Therefore, according to the principle of humanism, which was the basis of the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the case had to be reconsidered in favour of the asylum seeker. Moreover, the Court stressed that, in administrative cases, "the burden of proof of evidence rests with the defendant (in this case, the State authority)".

Kyiv, January 2009. Oksana Syroyid, National Project Manager in the office of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, discusses the training programme for judges with Roman Kuibida (left) and Oleksandr Banchuk, experts from the Centre for Political and Legal Reforms.

over unilateral administrative acts, legal regulation of administrative contracts and the responsibilities of public administrators.

TAKING ROOT

It has only been less than four years since the introduction of an administrative justice system in Ukraine with the financial support of Germany, France, Belgium and Liechtenstein, so it is still a bit too early to fully assess the system's performance, says Ms. Syroyid. However, the constraints that have yet to be tackled have clearly emerged.

"Not all administrative courts are operating the way they should and not all judges have been appointed," she says. "State authorities do not always find it convenient for the administrative justice system to operate efficiently and, as already mentioned, changing the mindset of judges has turned out to be no easy matter."

Judge Poplavskiy from Dnipropetrovsk acknowledges that the system will need time to take root. That is why he stands squarely behind the concerted efforts to promote it actively.

"Thanks to the Code of Administrative Court Procedure, Ukraine now has fulfilled the criteria for evaluating decisions, actions and omissions of State authorities in their interaction with the public," he says. "The principles of legality, good faith, reasonableness, rationality, fairness, the right to be heard, proportionality, transparency, sanctions and reparations are being put to the test for the first time."

This is bound to encourage officials to be more accountable and responsible in their decision-making, adds Judge Poplavskiy. "In addition, the principle of the burden of proof resting with the defendant is making public officials more disciplined and better prepared for court hearings."

Despite the inevitable obstacles and delays along the way, one thing is certain: There is no turning back to the old way of doing things, says Oksana Syroyid.

"From now on, the tasks will be firstly, to ensure that the principles prescribed by the Code are properly implemented, and secondly, to cultivate a better understanding among public officials that, when they deliver services on behalf of the State, their decisions become the focus of administrative justice."

Oksana Polyuga is a National Project Officer in the office of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine.

have benefited from 20 training sessions.

"It was really this training that fostered the true spirit of administrative justice," says a former participant, Judge Volodymyr Poplavskiy, Deputy Head of the Administrative Court of Appeal of Dnipropetrovsk.

DIGGING DEEPER

Being a trainer himself, Judge Poplavskiy starts all his seminars with the following message: "Forget the way you used to consider cases in the past and listen to the philosophy behind administrative justice. Dig deeper into the meaning of administrative justice and ask yourselves, 'Why was it established? What values were the people who drafted the Code of Administrative Court Procedure trying to impart?' "

Since Ukraine's administrative law is not yet fully developed, judges had to draw on the best experiences of countries with similar legal systems. So that they would be able to learn from some of the most experienced experts in Europe, the OSCE Project Co-ordinator tapped into a venerable institution — the *Conseil d'Etat,* which traces its roots to the thirteenth century and serves as the supreme court for administrative justice in France.

"There could not have been a more ideal partnership," says Oksana Syroyid. "The French and Ukrainian legal systems share the same roots in civil law. France also has a well-established practice of interpreting and applying the principles of administrative law and court procedure which are the focus of interest of the Higher Administrative Court of Ukraine."

Working with the French *Conseil d'Etat,* the staff of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator conducted a series of advanced seminars for judges in Kyiv from April to June 2007 on judicial control

Kyiv

Ukraine

SEA OF AZOV

BLACK SEA

E-Governance 101

Ukrainians are eager students of the Estonian experience

Almost everyone who communicates electronically, does online banking and shops over the Internet knows what e-government is: A natural offshoot of the success of e-commerce in the 1990s, it is a way for government agencies and departments to pursue a client-oriented approach by delivering their services to the public more efficiently through information and communication technology (ICT). However, the concept of "e-governance" — which goes beyond mere speed and convenience — is still a vague concept to many.

BY YAROSLAV YURTSABA

"For me, the biggest draw of e-governance is that it is supposed to help deregulate and unleash economic activities, since it cuts through omnipresent red tape and stems corrupt practices. However, I knew very little about the nuts and bolts behind the concept," says Olena Sayenko from the East Europe Foundation, a Kyiv-based NGO and a close OSCE partner in small and medium enterprise development.

Ms. Sayenko was among nine representatives of regional and city councils and civil society organizations from five different regions of Ukraine whose keen interest in the subject led them to the eGovernance Academy in Tallinn, Estonia.

The study tour was organized by the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine in November 2008 as part of its Local Economic Development Project, an initiative that was launched in 2004 to unlock the economic potential of some of the less developed regions in Ukraine.

"E-governance is all about enabling and empowering the citizen to take part in and influence the decision-making of government officials," Arvo Ott, Executive Director of the eGovernance Academy, told the group. "Accountability, transparency, responsiveness and efficiency are catch-words in the democratic process. Because e-governance encourages participation, it increases the chance that the views of minorities and the most vulnerable segments in society are heard and taken into account."

STEADY GROWTH

The Ukrainians had come to the right place: Estonia ranks among the world's leading countries in implementing e-government. Hardly any segment of its public sector — from health care and education to elections — is outside the online loop.

Although Ukraine's Internet market has been enjoying steady growth and the country's broadband penetration is among the fastest growing in the world, Mr. Ott reminded the group that technology and software were only part of the e-governance equation.

"E-Estonia came about mainly because of the Government's determined political will to inject dynamism into the country's development through an effective governance system," he said. "We also knew it was important to win the support of the public by making them aware of how e-government could benefit them. The openness and readiness of both officials and their constituencies to change and adjust traditional bureaucratic practices are basic ingredients for the smooth transition to online services."

Oksana Rozanova, deputy head of the Social Security Department in Konotop, a city in Ukraine's northern Sumy region, was impressed with the "simple and user-friendly way" in which Estonia's social security system was run, based on e-governance principles. "I admire how ordinary Estonians have been playing such an active role in making their country work," she said. "They have long since moved beyond the phase of merely carrying out online transactions

to making their views known on online forums dedicated to specific subjects, such as forestry and the environment."

Another useful lesson shared by the Estonians concerned the way the authorities had succeeded in encouraging the private sector to build a solid ICT infrastructure throughout the country. "It was these multiple public-private partnerships that made the Internet accessible to almost everyone," said Mr. Ott. "ICT firms and the banking sector recognized the clear linkage between a new mode of governance and the economic opportunities that would inevitably emerge from a digital society."

Not surprisingly, the challenges of security and privacy in an era of e-government were the subject of great concern among the Ukrainian visitors. Everyone was aware that, in 2007, Estonia had been the target of a series of cyber-attacks of unprecedented scale.

"Indeed, any incident resulting in the leaking of sensitive information or any technical breakdown would ruin the whole idea of e-governance and would play into the hands of its opponents," said Mr. Ott.

At a special session, Estonian experts demonstrated the multilayered security measures that the Estonians continue to put into place to ward off potential risks and unauthorized intrusions and to reduce the vulnerability of the country's cyberspace — measures that the Ukrainians felt they could easily introduce.

The experts also urged the Ukrainians to adopt an appropriate legal framework and launch a broad public awareness campaign on the importance of information security, the protection of personal data and the use of anti-virus software. They recalled that the concept of digital signatures — a feature that had now become routine practice — had sparked a heated public debate in Estonia.

TAKE-OFF POINT

The eGovernance Academy agreed to provide the participants with advice on how to establish a geographic information system (GIS), a powerful means of gathering, displaying, analysing and sharing data concerning a specific physical location. Decision-makers and citizens can tap into this information for a variety of reasons — to look for a good site for a store, to determine environmental damage, to examine the criminal pattern in a certain area, and so on.

"This technology will make local authorities more efficient and more transparent," says Ivan Romanov, who heads the Information

Department in the City Council of Slavutych, in the Kyiv region. "We plan to use it as a take-off point for delivering high-quality services to entrepreneurs and the general public."

Meanwhile, the representatives of the city of Konotop wanted to learn as much as they could about the broad spectrum of information that they could potentially provide to citizens through the touch-screen kiosks that the city plans to set up in public buildings. They looked forward to the day when information on decisions of local government, tenders and bids, and city development plans would be at everyone's fingertips.

Vasyl Melnyk, who heads the Secretariat of the City Council of Zastavna, in the western Khmelnitsky region, says he was thrilled to experience the "Estonian e-governance miracle" and to hear first-hand about the major milestones of the e-government process as it had unfolded, such as the adoption of "e-citizen charters".

"It's hard to imagine that Estonia managed to become a fully fledged, inclusive information society in just slightly more than a decade," he says. "The participants all agreed that, if we in Ukraine could only muster sufficient political will, there is no reason why we could not go the way of Estonia. In fact, Ukraine already has an information strategy in place which just needs activating. We hope that our pilot initiatives at the level of local municipalities will snowball and generate excitement, enthusiasm and interest and help spur economic growth and social development."

Yaroslav Yurtsaba is a National Project Manager and the Head of the Economic Development Unit in the office of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine.

November 2008. Toomas Sepp, Head of the City Council of Tallinn, explains the intricacies of "e-Tallinn" to the Ukrainian delegation.

eGovernance Academy: **www.ega.ee**

Ukraine gears up for largest ever OSCE mélange-disposal project

Rust stains show the age of dozens of huge metal containers, scattered over six locations across Ukraine, most of them exposed to the elements. Deteriorating by the day, akin to ticking bombs, they pose a threat to human life and the environment in the immediate surroundings and beyond: The vats hold thousands of tonnes of mélange, a toxic and highly polluting component once used by the Soviet army to propel short- and medium-range rockets.

BY SUSANNA LÖÖF

Since 2005, the OSCE and Ukraine have been developing a joint project to tackle this looming menace. The Organization is well placed to fulfil this role. Since 2002, it has accumulated solid experience and expertise, helping four other participating States to dispose of their stocks of mélange using safe, environmentally sound and cost-effective methods.

This year, practical work will start on the joint OSCE-Ukrainian project. In total, it aims to rid the country of a staggering 16,000 metric tonnes of mélange in what is set to be the OSCE's largest donor-funded project ever. In Albania, Armenia, Georgia and Montenegro, a total of 1,484 tonnes of mélange were either neutralized and recycled into mineral dressing or cautiously transported for disposal abroad, with amounts in each country ranging from 34 to 872 tonnes. The Ukrainian project addresses more than ten times the total amount of all these earlier projects combined.

Ukraine has long been seeking a way out of its mélange dilemma: Among all the former Soviet republics, it had the second highest volume of the noxious substance left on its territory.

Addressing the OSCE Permanent Council in April 2007, the then-Foreign Minister of Ukraine, Arseniy Yatsenyuk, described the matter as a "huge problem" for the country.

"This Organization should be praised for its practical assistance to participating States in

A storage site in western Ukraine, July 2005. OSCE expert Anton Martynyuk and Ukrainian Lt. Gen. Oleksandr Fomenko peer into an empty mélange container to inspect rust damage. Other storage vats at the same site still hold 2,200 tonnes of the hazardous material, set to be disposed of under a joint OSCE-Ukrainian project.

eliminating risks posed by environmentally hazardous military and industrial legacies," he said.

OSCE Secretary General Marc Perrin de Brichambaut has noted that the project's unprecedented scale illustrates the capacity and relevance of the OSCE more than 30 years after its founding. "The ageing mélange containers in Ukraine pose grave risks not only for the hundreds of thousands of people who live nearby, but also in areas far beyond," he said.

A single major leak or accident can have a severe impact on biological life within a 2-kilometre radius and turn a 25-km area into a contaminated, high-risk zone. If the nitrogen-based oxidizer comes into contact with water or anything organic, it causes spontaneous combustion. A film about the OSCE's mélange projects shows a haunting image of a leather shoe bursting into flames as the hazardous chemical is poured on it.

"By helping a participating State to deal with a serious human and environmental threat, the OSCE is making a positive difference once again in the security of the whole region," the Secretary General said.

The project's initial phase will focus on two storage sites that are especially worrisome: The first is in western Ukraine, where 2,200 tonnes of mélange are stored near the city of Ivano-Frankivsk, home to more than 200,000 people, and just 1 kilometre from the village of Tsenzhiv. The second is centrally located, near Vinnytsa, a city with more than 350,000 inhabitants, where 950 tonnes of mélange are stored. Compounding the danger is the site's proximity to a large ammunition depot and the bustling Salnytska railway station.

The international tender process for these pilot activities was launched in mid-December 2008, with the winning bidder expected to initiate the operation this summer. The disposal itself is envisaged to be completed 12 months later.

If things go according to plan, including the provision of support by donor countries, the same project is set to tackle the four other storage sites between 2010 and 2013. Fund-raising for the disposal continues, with Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Spain, Germany, Finland, the Czech Republic, Poland and Ukraine itself being among the donors so far.

Susanna Lööf is a Press Officer in the Secretariat's Press and Public Information Section.