The OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions

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Not too long ago, international relations and foreign policy were domaines reservées of state institutions and exclusive elites. This has changed fundamentally in the last few decades. Today, internationally well-connected non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have influence on foreign and security policy issues. A recent example of this is the campaign against land mines. The other way around, foreign ministries and international organizations are co-operating more and more with specialized NGOs. It can even be said that the degree of their interconnectedness with civil society is an indicator of their effectiveness.

Traditionally, the OSCE has always co-operated with a large spectrum of NGOs dealing with human dimension issues. About half of the usually more than 1,000 participants in the OSCE's annual Human Dimension Implementation Meetings in Warsaw are representatives of NGOs. By contrast, there have been almost no civil society actors that would have dealt with the OSCE's first and second dimensions – arms control, conflicts, security policy, and economic and environmental issues. This asymmetry has created the impression that human dimension issues are accessible for civil society actors, whereas security issues have remained a matter for states.

The OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions is about to correct this impression. Founded on 18 June 2013 in Vienna by a dozen of research institutes, the Network deals with all kinds of issues related to the OSCE. According to its "Mission Statement", the OSCE Network "is open to think tanks and academic institutions from OSCE participating and partner States that are willing and able to contribute academic expertise and policy analysis on OSCE-relevant issues." The creation of the Network was inspired by a proposal made by the OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier in his inaugural speech in July 2011. Today, the OSCE Network comprises 46 member institutions from 33 states and "provides expertise, stimulates discussion and raises awareness of the OSCE. It contributes to the ongoing security dialogue within the OSCE framework." (Mission Statement).

The OSCE Network "is an autonomous OSCE-related track II initiative. It is neither an OSCE structure nor subordinated to the OSCE or its participating States." (Ibid.). At the same time, the Network is eager to co-operate, on the basis of its own decisions, with OSCE structures, be they the Chairmanship, the Secretariat, the institutions, or individual participating States. At the OSCE Secretariat, a contact point for the Network has been established, currently provided by Ambassador Fred Tanner, Special Adviser to the Secretary General. As the Network is an informal body without legal status, budget and bureaucracy, its working structures are, accordingly, simple. A Network document titled "Working Instruments" foresees that Network meetings "take decisions on the basis of an absolute majority of the member institutes present", "decide on the activities of the network" and elect the co-ordinator and the members of the steering committee, each for a period of two years. If no Network meeting can happen, for example because no budget is available for convening one, decisions are taken by the steering committee. Jim Collins (Carnegie Endowment), Sonja Stojanovic Gajic (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy), Andrei Zagorski (IMEMO) and Wolfgang Zellner (Centre for OSCE Research / CORE) are members of the steering committee. Zellner also serves as the co-ordinator of the Network.

The OSCE Network conducts projects and convenes meetings. The Network's very first study "Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area" analysed the threat perceptions of governments and security policy elites in 18 OSCE participating States. This comparative study was elaborated on the basis of 18 country studies conducted by Network member institutes by late January/ early February 2014, that is, shortly before the violent escalation in Kyiv. The real surprise of this project was

> …the salient prominence of perceived domestic threats combined with questions of efficiency and legitimacy of governance. The common denominator is concern about weak, insufficient and/or worsening governance capacities. This concern is shared by all kind of countries.[1]

The second most prominent category of threats mentioned concerned a broad range of transnational threats and the interconnectedness of transnational threats and the strength or weakness of the domestic governance systems.

Military threats ranked high only in a very few countries, without exception those included in conflict dyads, such as Greece and Turkey. To stress it again: This reflected the situation just weeks before the annexation of Crimea and little more than two months before full-fledged fighting in Eastern Ukraine started. Meanwhile, the threat perceptions of governments and elites have changed dramatically. But the snapshot from January/February 2014 shows where the real vulnerabilities of states and societies lie: weak domestic governance combined with transnational threats and challenges.

The project was generously supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland. At the invitation of the OSCE Swiss Chairmanship, the project report was presented to an informal Helsinki+40 meeting at the Vienna Hofburg on 29 April 2014.

A second project in 2014 concerned "The Future of OSCE Field Operations (Options)". The aim of this project, which included 21 member institutions of the OSCE Network, was to help stimulate discussions on OSCE field operations

> at a time when field operations are confronted with a new dimension of challenges, such as that which is developing at present in Ukraine, while some participating States are attempting to limit the activities of the field operations they are hosting, or to close them with the argument that they had already fulfilled their mandates.[2]

The innovative element of this project was that it was fully embedded in the work of the Helsinki +40 Process, at that time a specific discussion format within the OSCE. The two project workshops on 27 June and 4 November 2014 were conducted at the invitation of the Special Co-ordinator under the Helsinki+40 Process, Irish Ambassador Philip McDonagh, to review the effectiveness and efficiency of the OSCE. That made it possible to have mixed track I and track II workshops with the participation of members of the Network, members of OSCE field operations, officials from the Secretariat and members of the Vienna Permanent Representations of the participating States. This allowed for different and better discussions than had the representatives of each status group discussed only among themselves. The project was supported financially by the German Federal Foreign Office and the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Yet another dimension of co-operation in the context of the OSCE was achieved by the 2015 project "Reviving

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1   Wolfgang Zellner (Co-ordinator) et al., Threat Perceptions in the OSCE Area (OSCE Networkof Think Tanks and Academic Institutions), Vienna 2014, p. 5.

2   Wolfgang Zellner & Frank Evers (principal authors) et. al., The Future of OSCE Field Operations (Options), (OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions), Vienna 2014, p. 2.

Co-operative Security in Europe through the OSCE",[3] led by Dr Teija Tiilikainen, the Director of the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, with contributions by 17 Network member institutions. The particular charm of this project is that it is a contribution of the OSCE Network to the wider effort of the "Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project" initiated by the members of the OSCE Troika, Switzerland, Serbia, and Germany and led by Ambassador Wolfgang Ischinger, a former state secretary in the German Federal Foreign Office. The report of this Network project, which was discussed at a workshop in Vienna in early September, was presented by Teija Tiilikainen at the Belgrade Security Forum on 1 October 2015 and, subsequently, handed over to the Panel of Eminent Persons. This project was generously supported by the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, and the governments of Switzerland, Serbia and Ireland.

Starting in Kyiv in 2013, it has become a good habit to organize Network panel discussions on current issues within the framework of Ministerial Council meetings. In Basel in 2014, the topic was the work of the freshly initiated Panel of Eminent Persons, which a number of Network members discussed with Ambassador Ischinger and others. A comparable event is planned for the 2015 Belgrade Ministerial Council meeting. Thus, the Network offers a nice informal forum within the framework of the second-highest OSCE decision-making body.

Informal networks have specific comparative advantages particularly in times when necessary dialogues are blocked at the official track I level. Informal track II dialogues can never replace the exchange among governments, but they can explore and test ideas and modes of access, elaborate analyses and recommendations in a more relaxed atmosphere, and thus, to a certain degree, prepare and facilitate governmental interaction. This is all the more true, as the boundaries between track I and track II continue to exist but are lower than in the past. Usually, track II experts know their counterparts in national ministries and co-operate with them more or less routinely. Against this background, it has become less unusual to organize track 1.5 meetings with participation of both governmental representatives and think tankers. Experience has shown that this format is particularly rewarding, because it also gives governmental representatives the opportunity to speak rather openly.

All this applies to the current security situation in Europe, the most difficult and dangerous one for several decades. The capacities of the OSCE Network to contribute to initiating a new phase of dialogue to overcome confrontational, sometimes almost mutually exclusive narratives are not yet exhausted, by far. At the time of the writing of this article, planning for 2016 was well underway, but it was too early to write about specific projects. When this issue of "Security & Human Rights" appears, in mid-January 2016, a look at the Network website (www.osce-network.net) will provide more information on Network activities in 2016.

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3   Teija Tiilikainen (Project Leader, Editor), Eeva Innola (Co-ordinator, Sub-Editor), et al., Reviving Co-operative Security in Europe through the OSCE (OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions), Helsinki 2015.

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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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