

# **OSCE Field Activities**

## **Verbal Encouragement, Factual Cutback**

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In 1991, a detachment of the CSCE Rapporteur Mission to the Republic of Albania was the very first direct on-site involvement of the C/OSCE in one of its participating States' internal affairs.<sup>1</sup> It was the prototype for later OSCE field missions which, with different mandates and in various capacities and formats, have been playing an important role in European post-Cold War security affairs ever since. They are a key instrument of dialogue between the continent's sub-regions. In more than twenty participating States, they have had a clearly stabilizing impact by managing conflict and supporting transitional processes.

Nonetheless, OSCE field missions and other on-site activities have been declining in terms of budgets and staff members and, since the Istanbul Summit in 1999, limited by their mandates. Increasingly, they busy themselves with the refining of the Organisation's bureaucratic regulations for the Performance Based Programme Budgeting process instead of creating external impact and enhancing visibility through their predominantly project-related work. Over time, they have become subject to somewhat harsh criticism, particularly during the so-called OSCE reform discussions in 2005-06. Surprisingly, however, OSCE field activities did not play a larger role five years later in the course of the 2009-10 OSCE Corfu Process, the temporary dialogue format that was created to overcome the 'serious decline of trust among the participating States' (Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis)<sup>2</sup> and to meet Russia's desire to discuss new foundations for European security.<sup>3</sup>

Generally speaking, the OSCE reality reveals an ambiguous picture of the Organization's field activities. While there is currently significant verbal encouragement and even visionary support to increase the Organization's overall standing and particularly its on-site efforts, there is also increasing hesitation on the part of various participating States about further field engagements as well as an alarming actual cutback of existing field operations.

### **Approval of OSCE field work, collective responsibility and a new vision**

At the OSCE Summit in Astana in December 2010, which, in a sense, concluded the year and a half of Corfu discussions, the Heads of State or Government of the 56 OSCE participating States collectively emphasized the value of the OSCE field missions. In the Astana Commemorative Declaration, they 'stress[ed] the importance of the work carried out by [...] the OSCE field operations [...] in assisting participating States with implementing their OSCE commitments'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they gave the subject of OSCE field activities an exceptional political dimension with the quite unexpected inclusion of the Moscow Commitment (1991) into the Declaration saying that

*'[...] commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned'.<sup>5</sup>*

In this way, the OSCE participating States reconfirmed at the highest political level their support for exemptions to the OSCE's principle of non-intervention in internal affairs (Helsinki Decalogue, principle VI)<sup>6</sup> and virtually invited each other to more consistent on-site work in fulfilling their general 'commitment to the concept [...] of comprehensive, co-operative, equal and indivisible security, which relates the maintenance of peace to the

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1 CSCE, Berlin Meeting of the CSCE Council 19 – 20 June 1991, Summary of Conclusions, para. I., pt. 2 and Annex 1, Berlin, 19 June 1991.

2 Permanent Mission of Greece to the OSCE, *Informal OSCE Ministerial Meeting, Corfu, 27-28 June The Present and Future of European Security: Reconfirm – Review – Renovate. Launching the Corfu Process. Reflection Paper by the Chairmanship-in-Office*, CIO.GAL/76/09, 17 June 2009.

3 The particular context was given by President Medvedev's rather unspecific proposal on 'drafting and signing a legally binding treaty on European security in which the organisations currently working in the Euro-Atlantic area could become parties'. See: Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, *President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev's Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders, Berlin, 5 June 2008*, SEC.DEL/85/08, 9 June 2008.

4 OSCE, Astana Commemorative Declaration 'Towards a Security Community', SUM.DOC/1/10/CORR.1, 3 December 2010.

5 Ibid.

6 CSCE, *Final Act, Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States*, Helsinki, 1 August 1975.

respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and links economic and environmental co-operation with peaceful inter-State relations'.<sup>7</sup>

These calls for more mutual care for each other's internal developments and intensified activities in the field were supported by the announcement of a new overriding maxim for security cooperation on the European continent – a new 'vision of a free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community'.<sup>8</sup>

### Little notice of OSCE proclamations

Beyond the OSCE's declarations, however, the picture is quite disappointing. In the European capitals, the Astana proclamations, by and large, went unnoticed. Immediately after the summit, political attention switched back to other discussion platforms and different topics – such as Europe's financial crisis and the Arab Spring. Since Astana, the OSCE as such, the idea of a Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community as well as the commitment to mutually ensuring interior stability across national borders have not played a detectable role in any major political conversation anywhere outside the OSCE. More than this and with respect to the subject of this article, the reduction of OSCE field activities that started about a decade ago is still continuing.

### Talk about field activities

The OSCE Corfu Process was the venue for discussing the key parameters of European security in all its aspects. The design of this process included ten Corfu working groups on specific subject-matters (or ticks) and the summarizing meetings of the 2010 Review Conference. It did not foresee a specific dialogue format on OSCE field activities. Nonetheless, in the many sessions of the Corfu Process, the participating States shared with each other a wide range of opinions on this subject. (Portraying them in detail would go far beyond the scope of this article.) With respect to the Corfu agenda's items, on the whole, they painted a multicoloured picture of increased general security concerns on most sides, supplemented by scattered and contradictory partial interests in regional and national affairs and in the Organization as such. The very fact that these issues were discussed in a friendly tone was a positive signal. On the other hand, there is still the 'lack of collective will' that the Greek Chairmanship detected at the beginning of the discussions in 2009 as the reason for 'prevent[ing] the OSCE from taking decisive action'.<sup>9</sup> This is, in essence, the reason for the moderate outcomes of Corfu and Astana – in general and, in particular, with respect to the subject of this article.

The OSCE's conceptual thinking on field activities went in seven main directions. It touched upon many political, structural and managerial issues but did not amount to a concise overall picture. As in earlier 'effectiveness' or 'efficiency' discussions, arguments to increase the effectiveness of on-site operations aimed at the very crux of the matter and ranged from supportive standpoints 'to expand the OSCE's field presences in some regions to calls for gradual transfer of their responsibilities to host countries' – or, in other words, to close them.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the idea of drafting 'general guidelines for OSCE field operation's activities', which was the core of Russia's contribution, was met with ambivalent reactions.<sup>11</sup> Discussants suggested, as a third line, strengthening OSCE executive structures for managing conflict, inter alia, through: enhancing analytical and other early-warning and early-action capacities, authorizing the Secretary General to initiate or take

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7 OSCE, 3 December 2010, loc. cit. (note 5)

8 Ibid.

9 Permanent Mission of Greece to the OSCE, *Report on the Corfu Process by the Chairperson of the Permanent Council Ambassador Mara Marinaki to the Chairman-in-Office and the Chairman of the 17th Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Greece H.E. MR. George A. Papandreou* (CIO.GAL/180/09) 24 November 2009.

10 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the OSCE, *Chairmanship's Summary of the Vienna Part of the 2010 OSCE Review Conference Closing Plenary Session* 26 October 2010 (RC.DEL/331/10) 27 October 2010.

11 Permanent Delegations of Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia, *Food-for-Thought Paper for the Corfu Process on Enhancing Effectiveness of the OSCE Field Operations* (PC.DEL/406/10/Corr.3), 2 July 2010.

crisis-response steps, and strengthening the conflict-mediation and early-warning capacities of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre<sup>12</sup> as well as improving quick-response capacities of the Chairmanship-in-Office, inter alia through elevating its competences in managing sensitive situations, possibly to some degree without prior PC agreement, and consolidating co-ordination mechanisms between the Chairmanship, Troika, Secretariat, and other OSCE structures.<sup>13</sup> As during earlier discussions within the economic and environmental dimension, proposals were made to engage in energy-crisis mediation although the OSCE, as a non-technical organization, hardly seems competitive in this area. A suggestion was made to build up capacities for early warning and mediation on energy security or to make the Organization a clearing house for information sharing or an energy security watchdog.<sup>14</sup> Proposals were made to consider new types of field activities such as support teams, liaison teams, regional offices, roving events, early-warning formats, new CSBMS or direct field engagements of central OSCE institutions.<sup>15</sup> These proposals largely departed from the existing range of the various, differently formatted OSCE field activities. The call to refocus on-site activities regionally on the South Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan reflected the participating States' shifting security concerns and the ongoing trend of relocating capacities and manpower eastwards.<sup>16</sup>

### Cutbacks in field activities: various reasons

For about ten years, observers have pointed to a constant decline of OSCE field activities that is in visible contrast to the positive talk about them in the context of Corfu and Astana. Recent years have seen the closure or replacement of about fifteen field operations and related field activities. (This trend started as early as 1993 with the closure of the OSCE Missions of Long Duration in Kosovo, Sandjak and Vojvodina.) There has been a steady replacement of politically mandated missions with service-providing presences having rather apolitical mandates. This has been particularly the case with the mandates of operations such as the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine in 1999, the Office in Minsk (2003), the Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan (2006), the Centre in Astana (2007) and the Office in Tajikistan (2008). In essence, there is a clear trend in holding back OSCE field operations, through their mandates, from interfering in the internal affairs of host countries. Since its operational zenith in 2001, the OSCE's spending on field operations has continually declined, both in absolute and in relative numbers. Their share in the annual OSCE Overall Budget fell from about 85% to roughly 65% — from 179.8 million Euros in 2001 to about 98.4 million Euros in 2010.<sup>17</sup> This development continues and may be explained in different ways:

First, the main reason for the Organization reducing its field activities clearly lies in the progressive marginalisation of the OSCE in general. This paradoxical trend mirrors the shrinking awareness among Europe's political elites, east and west of Vienna, of the advantages and necessity of sustaining day-to-day security contacts among all States of the continent and of having a comprehensive agenda for these contacts, sophisticated infrastructures and highly qualified expert teams in Vienna, The Hague, Warsaw and in the field so that common action may be taken in a flexible way. It reflects the great neglect of the fact that, at present, all states in the European context, from Vladivostok to Vancouver, collectively face security threats and challenges of a new quality that originate significantly from global development shifts and Europe's consequent loss of influence in the world. The importance of being earnest now about obligatory collective responsibility for the

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12 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the OSCE, 27 October 2010, loc.cit.(note 11).

13 Permanent Mission of Greece to the OSCE, 18 February 2010, loc.cit. (note 10).

14 Permanent Mission of Greece to the OSCE, 24 November 2009, loc.cit. (note 10).

15 See also: Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the OSCE, *Chairperson's Summary of the 2010 Review Conference* (RC.GAL/39/10) 1 December 2010.

16 See also: OSCE Department of Human Resources, OSCE Department of Human Resources, *Informal ACMF meeting – presentation: The 2011 Unified Budget Proposal and Human Resources Management* (PC.ACMF/53/10) 5 October 2010.

17 At the same time, the OSCE's overall unified budget was cut back from about 209 million Euros in 2001 to about 153 million Euros in 2010. See: OSCE Secretary General, *Annual Report 2001 on OSCE Activities, chapter 'Finance' and Annex I 'The OSCE 2001 Unified Budget'* (SEC.DOC/3/01) 26 November 2001, and: OSCE Director for Management and Finance, *2010 Unified Budget and Expenditure Report – Third Quarter* (PC.ACMF/69/10) 26 October 2010.

full range of common Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security affairs has not, so far, come to the active attention of Europe's political elites.

Second, in important Western capitals and headquarters, effective European security enforcement is, all in all, predominantly seen through the prisms of exclusive alliances, such as the EU and NATO, rather than from the perspective of an all-inclusive platform such as the OSCE. (Of course, this does not mean that the well-aimed use of cooperation via the OSCE and between these organizations has not contributed significantly to the creation of European security. It has and it continues to contribute to it.) This has been discussed time and again. Since its operational peak during what the OSCE historiography calls the period of resolving 'the crises associated with the break-up of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union that defined the work of the CSCE/OSCE in the 1990s',<sup>18</sup> the OSCE has therefore constantly lost profile and standing. While counting on enforceable security-building through their own organisations, the group of EU and NATO member countries pretty much disregards the advantages of bringing the consensus-based OSCE with its broad membership and soft security instruments into play. Conversely, Russia's attitude towards the Organisation is mixed as well and it does not, in any case, have something like a concept of proactively utilising the OSCE in its own interest. Several smaller participating States, which are among the potential beneficiaries of OSCE activities, frequently have conflicting interests and have no audible collective voice. All in all, this has negative implications for the OSCE agenda that increasingly consists of only second-rate items. Conceptually, this also hampers the activities of the Organization's decision-making bodies, institutions and, not least, its activities in the field.

Third, the lack of tangible results of the Corfu Process in 2009-10 and the 2010 Astana Summit clearly demonstrated the limits of mutual willingness to trust one another. The failure to adopt the virtually completed Astana Framework for Action 'Shared Priorities and Objectives' (CIO.GAL/179/10/Rev.5) was another indicator of the ongoing fundamental mistrust and the divergences between key participating States and Europe's new divide.<sup>19</sup> On these grounds, the dissent over conflicts involving four rather small entities in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus became a battering ram for agreements over real central themes of the OSCE, including its on-site endeavours, from assisting broad-range national transition agendas to mediating in conflicts.

Fourth, substantiated or not, the way in which OSCE field activities are conducted is also viewed with suspicion by Russia and others as vehicles for interfering in internal affairs and traditional zones of interest. This has especially been the case since the so-called coloured revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

Fifth, it is common knowledge that many host governments have put up serious resistance to OSCE long-term presences after the consolidation of the political regimes in their countries. At least since the closure of the OSCE Missions to Estonia and Latvia in 2001, hosting OSCE field presences has been stigmatized. Shutting a mission down is seen, inter alia, as a litmus test for successful transition processes. With respect to this, following the political gravitation of the European Union — itself a central security factor on the European continent — has been and continues to be immensely attractive. It is much more preferable for many host governments to directly use the EU's various accession, partnership and co-operation frameworks in this respect than to exploit the OSCE as a link with the European West. Beyond that, while the reasons for inviting an OSCE field presence have become moot in a number of cases, even the superficial appeasement of conflicts has frequently served to inspire calls to withdraw the OSCE from the field or reduce its activities. The aforementioned closure or replacement of about 15 field operations and related field activities has been accompanied by a substantial weakening of the mandates of many remaining operations as has been mentioned above. The closure of the OSCE Office in Minsk in early 2011 was the most recent marker of negative views of OSCE on-site activities. It was, by the way, virtually a direct comment of the Belarus government on the Astana Summit's renewal of the Moscow Commitments to take collective responsibility for negative

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18 OSCE Secretariat, *OSCE Handbook*, Vienna 2007, p. 10

19 OSCE, *Astana Framework for Action 'Shared Priorities and Objectives'*, CIO.GAL/179/10/Rev.5, 30 November 2010.



developments in the human dimension. Along with the termination of the OSCE Mission to Georgia (2008), this may now send signals encouraging further closures — for instance, the Office in Zagreb or the Centre in Astana.

Sixth, important Western participating States have reduced extra-budgetary contributions and the seconding of personnel to OSCE field operations since about 2008. This is a new trend. It is typically explained by budgetary constraints due to the economic and financial crisis. The declining engagement of the West weakens existing field activities and is further aggravated by the absolute reduction of the OSCE budget that has continued since 2001.

Seventh, the OSCE continues to significantly reduce personnel and resources for its major efforts in South-eastern Europe because it is the European Union that is commonly seen here as the chief interlocutor for the region — politically and economically. Even so, there are still latent security threats in the region such as, for example, in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia or in Kosovo, that may require OSCE involvement in the long run.

### **Reactivated conflict mediation after Corfu and Astana**

The OSCE is clearly about to lose its position as the leading conflict manager on the European continent. This point should be particularly accentuated here, as conflict management in Europe has, for years, been one of the OSCE's few most important comparative advantages in comparison with other international organisations or national agencies. But in this particular respect as well, the picture is not as unambiguous as one might assume. There are a number of encouraging signals as well.

The Corfu Process again revealed the participating States' principal view 'that the OSCE field operations can and do play a critical role in early warning and conflict prevention' and that one should 'explore further how field operations might engage in mediation at the local level, how they could engage on regional issues and how their analytical capacity might be strengthened'.<sup>20</sup>

In Astana, participating States reasserted on paper their determination to make '[i]ncreased efforts [...] to resolve existing conflicts in the OSCE area in a peaceful and negotiated manner, within agreed formats, fully respecting the norms and principles of international law enshrined in the United Nations Charter, as well as the Helsinki Final Act'.<sup>21</sup> Even Armenia and Azerbaijan were successfully persuaded in Astana to verbally renew their commitment to seeking a lasting solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and 'to bring[ing] real reconciliation to the peoples of the region'.<sup>22</sup>

In practical terms, talks on Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia have been continued or somewhat enlivened since Corfu and Astana. The OSCE, having been a mediating side in these processes for years, continues to be partially involved and partially just briefed. Russia is noticeably engaged in the two dialogue formats on Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. The resumption of the 5+2 talks on Transnistria in June 2011 in Moscow ended a long pause in the negotiations. President Medvedev personally took the initiative to resume Nagorno-Karabakh talks with his presidential colleagues from Armenia and Azerbaijan in Sochi and Kazan in March and June 2011 respectively. The OSCE was briefed, but was not involved here, either through the Minsk Group or through the Chairmanship. The Geneva consultations on security and stability in the South Caucasus continue with the aim of finding a solution to the situation in Georgia. They are co-chaired by the OSCE. The consultations along with joint efforts of the OSCE and the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) facilitated further meetings and the exchange of information within the so-called Incident Prevention and

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20 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the OSCE, 1 December 2010, 24 November 2009, loc.cit. (note 16).

21 OSCE, 3 December 2010, loc.cit. (note 5).

22 OSCE, *Joint Statement by the Heads of Delegation of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-chair Countries of the, and the Presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia, OSCE Summit Meeting 2010, Astana, 1–2 December 2010*, at: [http://summit2010.OSCE.org/en/press\\_release/node/431](http://summit2010.OSCE.org/en/press_release/node/431).

Response Mechanism.

### Growing reservations against OSCE conflict management

On the other hand, it was precisely the disagreement over the Organization's role in resolving the aforementioned protracted conflicts that prevented participating States from moving from announcements to substantial practical decisions in Astana. The envisaged Framework for Action that also included decisions with respect to OSCE activities in the field was not adopted. There was and continues to be little or no real overall comprehension among important participating States of numerous dormant security threats in, for instance, the Balkans, Turkey, Ukraine, the North Caucasus or Central Asia (to say nothing of potential sources of tension in Western Europe), and the tasks the OSCE is possibly facing in these areas in the medium or long term. The hesitant involvement of the OSCE in the second Kyrgyz crisis in June 2010 demonstrated once again the deep uncertainties in various participating States about OSCE conflict mediation. Even a relatively minor support measure such as the deployment of the OSCE Police Advisory Group in Kyrgyzstan was only able to be realized after months of endless discussions.


After the intensive discussion period of the Corfu Process and the Astana Summit, talks in Vienna returned to a rather unexciting daily routine. The Lithuanian OSCE Chairmanship has set itself modest tasks for 2011 - generally and with respect to OSCE field operations. In its work programme, the Chairmanship has pledged itself to look into surveyable, practical matters such as effective project management, appointment and recruitment procedures and selected democratization and human-rights issues.<sup>23</sup> Over the year, the Lithuanian Chairmanship has hosted a series of ambassadorial and expert meetings with special focus on OSCE conflict management. They covered questions from classic matters such as early warning and early response to new subjects such as the challenges to the OSCE posed by natural and man-made disasters.<sup>24</sup> To support these discussions, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE), Hamburg, jointly organized a workshop on 'Developing OSCE Field Activities' at the OSCE headquarters in Vienna. At this time, experts from the OSCE Secretariat and the national delegations to the OSCE are looking into possible ways of streamlining the Secretariat's organigram and specifically its conflict-management structures. Aside from these and other brainstorming activities, there is currently no fundamental discussion on preventing the Organization, with what the Lithuanian Chairmanship called its 'strong right arm'<sup>25</sup>— the field activities — from slowly, but surely losing profile and standing.

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23 Permanent Mission of the Republic of Lithuania to the OSCE, *2011 Lithuanian OSCE Chairmanship Work Programme* (CIO, GAL/4/11/Rev.1) 12 January 2011.

24 See: OSCE, *Chairmanship. The V to V Dialogues*, at: <http://www.OSCE.org/cio/81397>.

25 Ibid.



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