Ethnopolitical Conflicts in Eastern Europe
and the OSCE

An Interim Appraisal

Stefan Troebst

ECMI Brief # 1
August 1998
The European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI) is a non-partisan institution founded in 1996 by the Governments of the Kingdom of Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the German State of Schleswig-Holstein. ECMI was established in Flensburg, at the heart of the Danish-German border region, in order to draw from the encouraging example of the peaceful coexistence between minorities and majorities achieved here. ECMI’s aim is to promote interdisciplinary research on issues related to national minorities and majorities in a European perspective and to contribute to the improvement of inter-ethnic relations in those parts of Western and Eastern Europe where ethnopolitical tension and conflict prevail.

ECMI Brief is written either by the staff of ECMI or by outside authors commissioned by the Centre. As ECMI does not propagate opinions of its own, the views expressed in any of its publications are the sole responsibility of the author concerned.
Ethnopolitical Conflicts in Eastern Europe and the OSCE

*An Interim Appraisal*

by Stefan Troebst

---

**SUMMARY**

Three levels or institutions have emerged as crucial within the OSCE framework for handling ethnopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe—the Permanent Council made up of the OSCE Permanent Representatives of the currently 55 participating States, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities and the long-term missions which the OSCE maintains in over a dozen trouble spots. The OSCE shows considerable success in dealing with ethnopolitical conflicts where away from its rivalry with the United Nations, NATO or the European Union it can set its sights somewhat lower — Chechnya, Crimea, the Baltic states, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, Macedonia and Eastern Slavonia. Here OSCE has succeeded in transforming conflicts that have broken out and in contributing to the prevention of future conflicts. However, major conflicts such as Bosnia-Hercegovina or Nagorny-Karabakh appear to be too unmanageable for OSCE’s still embryonic structures with its insufficient military know-how and low acceptance among major partners.
Ethnopolitical Conflicts in Eastern Europe and the OSCE

An Interim Appraisal

By Stefan Troebst

For the „old“ CSCE¹, the period between the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of the Serbian wars for the Yugoslav succession as well as the implosion of the Soviet Union was too short to respond effectively. Not until the summer of 1992 when the Helsinki II document was signed with its decisions on strengthening CSCE institutions and structures, on establishing the office of High Commissioner on National Minorities and on early warning systems, conflict prevention, crisis management, and the peaceful settlement of disputes were the foundations laid for a “new“ and more responsive CSCE (called the OSCE since 1 January 1995).² From then on instruments emerged with which some of the negative effects of the interlinked processes of state collapse and nation-building in Eastern Europe could be stemmed.³ The CSCE tried to identify at an early stage ethnopolitical conflicts within the new-old states as well as the causes of wars between them so as to prevent such conflicts either with the means at its

¹ CSCE = Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe; OSCE = Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
own disposal or together with other international partners. In areas where force had already been used, the CSCE tried to return the dispute to the negotiating table; and in post-war situations it offered its good offices as an intermediary for permanent peaceful solutions.⁴

Following a period of several years spent searching for, trying out, and rejecting a number of forms of action, mechanisms, channels and sub-committees, three levels or institutions have emerged as crucial within the OSCE framework for handling ethnopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe. They are, firstly, the Permanent Council made up of the Permanent Representatives of the currently 55 participating States of the OSCE; secondly, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, who occupies a largely independent position within the OSCE’s institutional framework owing to his broad mandate; and, thirdly, the long-term missions which the OSCE maintains in over a dozen trouble spots and which are linked through the Conflict Prevention Centre to the Vienna headquarters, the OSCE Secretariat.⁵ The coordinating and managerial authority for all these sub-divisions and sub-levels is the Chairman-in-Office, i.e. the foreign minister of the participating State currently occupying the chair.⁶

---


this chairmanship changes every year and therefore continuity is only partially ensured, the Chairman-in-Office is assisted by his predecessor and his successor, with whom he forms the so-called troika. In addition, he is supported by a Secretary General, who is elected for a three-year term.7

The Permanent Council

The body in charge of the OSCE’s day-to-day activities, which are largely centred on Eastern Europe, is the Permanent Council, formerly known as the Permanent Committee or the „Vienna Group“.8 The regular Thursday meetings at the Vienna Hofburg conducted by the representative of the Chairman-in-Office, informal meetings of this body also held weekly, problem-oriented contact, regional and other sub-groups as well as confidential circles and discussion groups on the fringes form the most important discussion, consultation and decision-making forum of the OSCE. The heads of the long-term missions, the High Commissioner and other OSCE officials regularly report to the Permanent Council. The Council decides on sending new missions and on extending and reformulating the mandates of existing missions. Participating States submit pressing problems among each other to the Council and discuss controversial issues. The Council also prepares and takes decisions and, above all, decides on the budget. The Permanent Council is thus increasingly replacing the once so influential Committee of Senior Officials

(since 1995: Senior Council), which now meets only once every four months. Within the Permanent Council there are formalized groupings such as that of the EU states as well as informal groups such as the Turkic-language participating States. Further centres of power and interests are the CIS headed by the Russian Federation and of course the transatlantic members USA and Canada. The smaller and neutral states come accordingly under strong pressure to side with one of these camps.

The High Commissioner on National Minorities

The office of High Commissioner on National Minorities, which is granted a comprehensive mandate and considerable independence from the OSCE’s Vienna headquarters, has been held since its establishment at the beginning of 1993 by the former foreign minister of the Netherlands, Max van der Stoel. His activities, which he performs from The Hague, focus on containing rising inter-ethnic tension and preventing ethnopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe through counselling, mediation and recommendations to the parties to the dispute. However, early warning to the Permanent Council together with early action as stipulated in the mandate are not part of his activities. As a rule all this

---


10 Chigas, Preventive Diplomacy, p. 51 (as footnote 4). Cf. also María Amor Martín
happens behind closed doors. Only some of the recommendations to
governments of participating States have been published to date.\textsuperscript{11} The High
Commissioner is currently dealing with matters relating to the Greek minority in
Albania, the Slovak minority in Hungary, Hungarian minorities in Slovakia and
Romania and inter-ethnic relations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There are
another five regional focuses, which are also covered by the OSCE long-term
missions, namely the situation of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia
and Latvia, the Albanian minority in Macedonia, the Serb minority in Croatia
and inter-ethnic relations on the Crimean peninsula which belongs to the
Ukraine. The treatment of Roma throughout Eastern Europe has now been
transferred to the newly formed “Contact Point for Sinti and Roma Issues“
within the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights based in
Warsaw which otherwise specialises in election monitoring in Eastern Europe.\textsuperscript{12}

The current High Commissioner does not tire of sending two reminders to the
Vienna headquarters: „Capital invested in conflict prevention is capital well spent“\textsuperscript{13} is one ceterum censeo, and “We must have an open eye for longer-term
developments with a view to anticipating future crises and not only pay attention
to already existing conflicts“, being the other.\textsuperscript{14} However readily Max van der

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Report by Mr Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. OSCE Review Meeting, Vienna, 4-21 November 1996 (REF. RM/71/96/4
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Stoel is supported by the OSCE machinery and the participating States, the latter in particular are reserved when it comes to providing financial backing.

Another focus of the High Commissioner’s efforts is setting international standards for policy on minorities. In the course of his four years in this post, aspects of language and education policy have gained in importance crucially in Max van der Stoel’s eyes. In 1996 this prompted him, with the help of a group of experts, to „attempt to clarify in relatively straight-forward language the content of minority education rights generally applicable in the situations in which the [High Commissioner] is involved“\textsuperscript{15} and to publish them in the form of explicit proposals relating to the relevant legislation of the participating States of the OSCE.

Owing to their unofficial nature, most of the High Commissioner’s activities are not subject to external scrutiny. However, the considerable international prestige acquired by Max van der Stoel through his OSCE work is unmistakable. This is clearly demonstrated by the reluctance of even his resolute opponents among the participating States to stand up against him in public.

**The long-term missions**

The now established term of missions of long duration or long-term missions (as opposed to shorter rapporteur missions and fact-finding missions) is misleading insofar as the missions at least \textit{de jure} are not sent for a long period; rather, their duration has to be confirmed by the Permanent Council every six months. These

---

missions\textsuperscript{16}, which usually consist of four to several dozen diplomats, army officers, lawyers, economists, journalists and regional experts of varying age, sex, religion, native language, ethnic background and nationality, are given varying and often very flexible mandates depending on the problem at hand, ranging from mere monitoring for early warning purposes and preventive diplomacy to conflict management, mediation efforts and settlement of disputes. In addition, according to the Swedish Chairman-in-Office of 1992, Margareta af Ugglas, the missions are supposed to perform the following functions:

```
- to be an ‘ombudsman’ for aggrieved parties, to be at the receiving end when the parties need to lodge their complaints about those wielding power, locally or nationally
- to be the political antennae of the CSCE, picking up the first tremors of an impending political upheaval or military confrontation
- to act as an intermediary in arranging contacts between the parties concerned and external actors
- to become a trusted partner in a dialogue with the parties concerned and to act as an adviser on various issues
- to be a mediator, to convince the parties of the virtues, the outline and the details of a negotiated conflict settlement.
```


\textsuperscript{17} Margareta af Ugglas, Conditions for Successful Preventive Diplomacy, in: Carlsson (ed.), The Challenge of Preventive Diplomacy, pp. 11-32, here p. 23 (as footnote 13).
The first two missions were sent in September 1992 to the Republic of Macedonia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro). Whereas the *CSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia* (presently called the *OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje*) remains in force to this day, seeking to achieve a settlement between the majority population and the sizeable Albanian minority\(^\text{18}\), the *CSCE Missions of Long Duration to Kosovo, Sanjak and Vojvodina* had to leave their operational areas in July 1993 because the Belgrade authorities refused to extend the visas of mission members.\(^\text{19}\) In February, High Commissioner Max van der Stoel has been nominated Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office for Kosovo. He managed to visit Kosovo only once, in February 1998, and that not in his official but his private capacity.\(^\text{20}\) As a result of the Drenica massacre committed by Serbian security forces against Albanian civilians in March 1998, the new Polish Chairman appointed Felipe González as new Personal Representative for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia including Kosovo. Owing to Belgrade’s refusal to cooperate he, too, has not been able to fulfil his mandate.\(^\text{21}\)


\(^{21}\) Stefan Troebst, Conflict in Kosovo: Failure of Prevention? An Analytical
Since 1992 the number of long-term missions has multiplied. The OSCE is currently maintaining missions in Georgia, Moldova and the Ukraine, which focus on the crisis regions of South Ossetia, Transdniestria and the Crimea, as well as in Estonia and Latvia where the emphasis is on the large Russian-speaking portion of the residential population, in Tajikistan where the main issues are conflict resolution and the building of a civil society, and since 1996 in Croatia with its Serb minority especially in Baranja and western Syrmia. A special case is the mission to Groznyi tolerated with reluctance at first by the Russian Federation, which allowing for Moscow’s sensitivities operates under the official title of OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya. The same is true of the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus sent to Minsk at the end of 1997. The huge mission in Bosnia-Hercegovina comprising several hundred members, which was sent in the wake of the Dayton Agreement and swallows up almost half of the OSCE’s total budget, is very much out of the ordinary. And an even larger mission comprising several thousand military observers for monitoring the Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire in Nagorny-Karabakh has been
at the planning stage for five years now.25

To date, none of the missions sent since 1992 have been recalled, even though the governments of such host countries as Estonia, the Ukraine and Macedonia are urging this, because they feel stigmatised by the continued presence of an OSCE mission with the considerable loss of sovereignty that this entails. Also from the OSCE’s point of view, no mission mandate has been permanently realized to date. Here the OSCE finds itself trapped by its own flexibility: all the mandates are formulated so broadly that virtually any risk to the internal or external security of the host country can constitute grounds for the mission’s activities. This also means that it is difficult to fulfil and complete the mandate.

However, this very elasticity of the mandate ensures the considerable success of the missions, even though spectacular breakthroughs are very rare indeed. For instance, in Chechnya the OSCE’s efforts helped bring about a ceasefire under very trying conditions26, and in Georgia the South Ossetia problem has been if not eliminated then at least contained.27 The mission to Macedonia, a country

---


which was subjectively under the threat of a Serb invasion in 1992 and objectively suffering from the UN embargo imposed on rump-Yugoslavia as well as from an economic blockade from Greece, was important in the absence of international recognition of the new mini republic at least until the arrival of an United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR, presently United Nations Preventive Deployment—UNPREDEP) as a “consolation“ in terms of promoting psychological stability and providing reliable information, while also serving as an early warning system and a stumbling-block for any potential aggressor.  The Moldova mission managed together with Russian, and more recently Ukrainian, mediation to bring the central government in Chişinău and the self-appointed “Transdniestrian Moldavian Republic“ on the eastern bank of the Dniester closer to a negotiated settlement. The Tajikistan mission established an ombudsman office under the most adverse conditions, while the Ukraine mission made a crucial contribution to defusing the standoff between the central government in Kiev and the Russian-speaking majority in Crimea.

---


28 Troebst, Präventive Friedenssicherung (as footnote 18).


which escalated dramatically in March 1995. In Estonia and Latvia the missions helped stabilize the situation through partial reduction of the tension in relations between the titular nation and the Russian-speaking residential population.

A key to the relative success of the missions is their flat command structure and practice-oriented composition. Even the senior posts, that of head of mission, his deputy and, where necessary, team leaders, are not held exclusively by career diplomats but also by people from other walks of life. For instance, a French specialist in Oriental studies headed the mission to Tajikistan and a Swiss journalist the Ukraine mission. The language skills and regional knowledge of their members and the usually highly qualified local staff mean that OSCE missions are very well grounded as a rule.


An interim appraisal

„What is unique about the OSCE?“ Katherine Birmingham recently asked, pointing in particular to the combination of short-term crisis management and long-term conflict prevention. At the same time, she stressed that the OSCE’s tasks relating to ethnopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe were more clearly defined than that of the United Nations and more practice-oriented than that of the Council of Europe.\footnote{Katherine Birmingham, The OSCE and Minority Issues. The Hague 1995, p. 40.} Another essential element is that the OSCE is the only operational pan-European organization in which the Russian Federation is a full member. Thus, in Eastern Europe this governmental network stretching from Aqmola to Ottawa suffers less and less from the odium of a “Western Agency“.

The rising number of Eastern Europeans at the Vienna headquarters, in the long-term missions and at the Hague-based office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities is also helping this trend, as testified by the gradual but steady improvement in cooperation between the OSCE and the Russian Federation in the CIS region.\footnote{Cf. Anna Kreikemeyer, Andrej V. Zagorskij, Rußlands Politik in bewaffneten Konflikten in der GUS. Zwischen Alleingang und kooperativem Engagement. Baden-Baden} Thanks to the constant presence and thus high visibility among the public, the authorities and the governments in the Eastern European crisis regions, it is the missions that stand for the OSCE locally and not the headquarters on the imposing Kärtner Ring in Vienna. Not least for this reason the missions perform functions beyond their direct and specific tasks in effectively conveying the values of Helsinki into the zone of tension between the EU’s eastern borders and China’s western border.

The now harmonious coordination of the complementary activities being
pursued by the long-term missions and the High Commissioner with their clearly defined tasks as well as the routinely smooth coordination between the Chairman-in-Office, the Permanent Council and the Secretariat with regard to OSCE policy at local level, meaning in Eastern Europe’s areas of tension, are greatly enhancing responsiveness and efficiency. However, there is some interorganizational friction such as that reported by the former head of the Ukraine mission, the Swiss journalist Andreas Kohlschütter, relating to the OSCE’s management of the Crimea crisis in March 1995:

“Against the background of the Crimea experience, this [criticism] concerns in particular the weak points in the OSCE’s decision-making mechanisms and communication structures. At the moment of the critical escalation of the Crimea problem they played a disappointingly weak role [...]. There was no clear, coherent and coordinated leadership. The OSCE signals that were sent out when the situation escalated in March 1995 were contradictory for a long period. Poorly defined areas of responsibility were as paralyzing and unsettling as the frequent and long absences of indispensable OSCE decision-makers. At this critical time for crisis prevention [...] no common clear and therefore effective language in terms of preventive diplomacy was found [emphasis in the original].”

Regardless of this unfavourable example and the favourable cases cited, the question of the success or failure of the OSCE in handling ethnopolitical conflicts in Eastern Europe cannot be answered conclusively. “Today“, noted a leading German CSCE diplomat in 1993, “it can only be said that no new

35 Kohlschütter, Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Präventivdiplomatie, p. 147 (as footnote 31).
conflicts have broken out in the regions where the CSCE has been active\textsuperscript{36}, and even five years on it is not possible to improve on this qualified statement. However, it can be said that the OSCE is expected to show some success in dealing with ethnopolitical conflicts where away from its rivalry with the United Nations, NATO or the European Union it can set its sights somewhat lower — Chechnya, Crimea, the Baltic states, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, Macedonia and Eastern Slavonia. The major conflicts such as Bosnia-Hercegovina or Nagorny-Karabakh are too unmanageable for its still embryonic structures with its insufficient military know-how and low acceptance among major partners. It cannot be expected to accomplish more than to transform conflicts that have broken out and to prevent future conflict in the still strong force field unleashed by the epoch-making 1989. The tectonic changes in Eastern Europe’s newly emerging landscape of states and nations have not yet come to a standstill in many regions.

ECMI Publications

ECMI Brief


ECMI Reports

# 1: Prit Järve: *From Ethnopolitical Conflict to Inter-Ethnic Accord in Moldova. Flensburg, Germany, and Bjerremark, Denmark, 12-17 September 1997*, March 1998, 47 pp., 1 map.

ECMI Working Papers