The Austrian OSCE Chairmanship. Assessment and outlook

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1. Introduction
From the very beginning Austria engaged itself in the CSCE process as it was in its genuine interest to make the frontiers of the cold war more penetrable. Very often this neutral and non-aligned group proved to be the driving force that provided important impulses when negotiations between the two blocs became begged down and it thus contributed decisively to the successful outcome of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975. The role which the Helsinki Final Act, and in particular basket III focusing on ‘human contacts’, played in bringing down the communist system in the late 1980s is difficult to quantify. A Special Permanent Council in Vienna marking the 25th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act on 19 July 2000 heard moving statements by a series of prominent human rights activists praising that contribution.

Through the signing of the Paris Charta for a New Europe by 35 Heads of State and Government in November 1990 the change from an East-West Conference, where ideological confrontation was part of the daily agenda, into a structure based on a common set of values became evident. This manifesto-like document initiated a development which culminated only recently in the Charta for European Security signed in Istanbul on 19 November 1999.

In the nine intervening years any hopes that the CSCE/OSCE could develop into the only and all embracing security organisation in Europe were dashed as well as the expectations that the CSCE/OSCE would not find an adequate role in the evolving European security architecture and to limit itself to a rather powerless and therefore widely ignored debating club. It was the Dayton General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, of November 1995, which for the first time foresaw for the OSCE a significant role in post-conflict rehabilitation. The operation in Bosnia-Herzegovina meant an action-oriented quantum leap for the OSCE that made the organisation one of the important actors in the field, alongside the United Nations and NATO. It was in 1995 when Austria first declared its interest in taking over the yearly-rotating Chairmanship of the OSCE.

2. Austria’s motivation to put itself forward as a candidate for the OSCE Chairmanship
The motivation which guided Austria to put itself forward as a candidate for this function was threefold: Firstly, to focus on an organisation that essentially

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promoted conflict prevention and civil crisis management.

Secondly, — as a neutral, non-aligned State — to signal international solidarity coupled with a readiness to invest personnel and financial resources for a common cause. Thirdly, to strengthen Vienna as the headquarters for international organisations.

The parameters which were to affect the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship in 2000 could not be anticipated in 1995 — both with regard to foreign policy relations and with regard to the role which the OSCE would play in the European security architecture. The aforementioned considerations remained relevant, however.

3. The development of the OSCE since 1995

As mentioned above, with the start of the Swiss Chairmanship in 1996 and the responsibility for implementing important parts of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the operative activities of the organisation multiplied. Within the framework of its mandate, the OSCE, among other tasks, was asked to organise elections at different levels and entities not earlier than six before and not later than nine months after the signature of the General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina in Paris (14th December 1995). For that to occur the whole election framework had to be set up by a Provisional Election Commission chaired by the Head of the OSCE Mission, a United States official. In a country torn by a bloody and devastating civil war such a role provided considerable leverage. The United States may at that moment for the first time have discovered the usefulness of the OSCE as an important steering device.

In 1997 there followed an OSCE operation led by the former Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky in Albania, serving as the Personal Representative of the Danish Chair. The highly sensitive operation was to successfully stabilize the situation in Albania by brokering a compromise between all the Albanian parties, leading to early elections. The undertaking was supported by a stabilization force of a group of countries forming a 'coalition of the willing' under Italian leadership. Also in 1997 an originally small mission was established in Croatia to assume those policing functions handed over by the United Nations Transitional Administration in 1998 and this ventured into new fields of action.

On the basis of the Holbrook-Milosevic Agreement and the respective decisions of the OSCE Permanent Council in October 1998 the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM) was established by dispatching 1200 civilians with a military background to the Kosovo. During a couple of months this mission served as a somewhat risky but effective buffer displaying concrete mediating functions between the two sides. It was the failure of the political process at Rambouillet and Paris and the threat of imminent NATO intervention which necessitated the withdrawal of that operation in March 1999. Upon Russian insistence, it was the United Nations who in June of that same year took control of Kosovo, the OSCE only serving as one of the pillars of UNMIK (United Nations Mission in Kosovo).