Europe’s troubled waters. A role for the OSCE: the case of the Kura-Araks

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The current flood and drought disasters in European river basins have some traits in common: the lack of transboundary water management, and the mixed heritage of the Cold War. The recent impact of the OSCE Economic Forum in the Southern Caucasus shows a good practice of addressing a worst case of water-related threats to international security. It illustrates the need for third party engagement and responsive financing arrangements. A key role of the OSCE network is to facilitate citizens' diplomacy and inter-basin solidarity.

In policy debate on global water problems, there is a growing consensus on the principle that transboundary water resource management should be considered an international and regional public good. Thus the UN Earth Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg devoted a special session to the need for new mechanisms for the provision of such a good, within the framework of the Global Water Partnership (GWP). However, the scope of the debate tends to be limited to traditional relations between Western donor countries and developing countries from the Third World. Problems in the ‘new’ transboundary river basins of the former Second World are still largely terra incognita.

The floods in the heartlands of Europe, threatening the cultural heritage of Prague and Dresden, dramatically illustrate that water disasters defy political borders as well as conventional division lines between North and South. In this respect, flood victims in the Elbe-Moldau basin share the fate of people living in the river basins of the Southern Caucasus or Central Asia who still feel the effects of the Asian drought disaster during the summer of 2000.

In the emergency responses to the multi-billion flood damage, it was hardly noticed that an innovative mechanism for addressing transboundary water problems is already functional in the context of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In Prague, in May 2002, the Tenth OSCE Economic Forum was devoted to the sustainable use and the protection of the quality of water, with a focus on South-Eastern Europe, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Steered by the OSCE Chairmanship and the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), the Forum has been devised as a permanent platform for early warning and confidence building.

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A key event in the Economic Forum process was the Third Preparatory Seminar in Baku, April 2002. For the first time since the breakup of the Soviet Union, an international high level meeting addressed water problems in the Kura-Araks basin, shared by Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. To estimate the results, one should take into account the extraordinary circumstances of the Seminar. First, water problems are difficult to disentangle from the environmental effects of 15 years of armed and 'frozen' conflicts. Second, the scale and the urgency of the problems are in every sense of the word immeasurable. Latest measurements of water pollution and scarcity in the basin date from 1990, before the collapse of the Soviet monitoring system. In these respects the Seminar offered an occasion to for Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian stakeholders, including high-ranking water experts, to restore contacts that were inhibited by blockades and burdened by experiences of war.

Iron curtains
To understand the obstacles to cooperation in European basins, we can draw some comparisons between the Kura-Araks and the Elbe-Moldau. Despite obvious differences, a connecting factor is the mixed heritage of the Cold War:

- **Political.** Both basins were cut through by the Iron Curtain, fencing off the Soviet bloc from NATO allies West (Germany) and the South (Turkey). Additionally, the militarization of the Kura-Araks basin served the purpose of strengthening the vulnerable South Flank of the USSR with respect to the Near East. Especially after the Islamic revolution of 1976 in Iran, this became a priority internal security concern for Azerbaijan and other Muslim-populated republics.

- **Environmental.** The scale of the flood disaster in the Elbe-Moldau is comparable with the drought disaster in the Kura-Araks, in particular in terms of incalculable economic and social costs to victimized people. A more poignant aspect is the lack of international and public preparedness. In both cases, the early warning mechanisms of specialized agencies and environmental NGOs had failed to signal the high vulnerability of the basins to floods, respectively droughts.

- **Economic.** During the Cold War period, the Elbe-Moldau and Kura-Araks basins belonged to the highest developed industrial areas of the Soviet bloc. Especially in the Kura-Araks, water management arrangements served the needs of a centralized command economy (hydro-electric power, large-scale irrigated agriculture, etc.), with destructive effects for environmental sustainability and long-term water security.

- **Socio-psychological.** At the level of societies, sensitivities in relations of cooperation are to some extent comparable. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, German-Czech relations continue to be burdened with deep-rooted problems.

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