The OSCE long-term missions: A creative tool under challenge

Victor-Yves Ghebali

From the autumn of 1992 onwards, the OSCE has devoted a considerable part of its political expertise and financial resources to operational activities related to conflict management. For that purpose, it developed two major cross-dimensional instruments with no real counterpart in other security organizations: the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and field missions known as ‘Long-Term Missions’ (LTMs). The HCNM represents an instrument of a specialized nature in the sense that the institution is mandated to act only at a specific phase of the conflict management cycle (prevention) and to address only a particular category of conflicts (those involving ethnic minority issues). LTMs are not subject to such limitations. As a tool of a general nature, they are entitled to intervene at any phase of the conflict management cycle (conflict resolution and post-conflict rehabilitation as well as conflict prevention) and to address all kinds of conflicts, whether ethnic or non-ethnic. Field missions can also be created for purposes other than conflict management, for assisting the host State to improve compliance of its overall OSCE commitments and, more particularly, to provide support for the democratization process. The present analysis offers an assessment of the experience developed so far, after more than a decade (1992-2004), by LTMs assuming pre-conflict, conflict resolution or post-conflict functions. Starting with a brief reminder of the parameters of conflict management in the OSCE area, it discusses the issues related to the operating modalities of LTMs, with special emphasis on the termination of a mandate, before addressing the stakes that such a creative tool presently represent in the ongoing process of OSCE reform.

---

1 Victor-Yves Ghebali is Professor at the Graduate Institute of International Studies, Geneva.

2 The OSCE also has a third conflict management instrument: the Geneva Court for conciliation and arbitration. Established by the 1992 Stockholm Convention, which presently binds only some 30 participating States, the Court is not an OSCE body, but an OSCE-related body; since the entry into force of the Stockholm Convention (December 1994), the Court has remained totally inactive.

3 Such field missions operate in Uzbekistan (since 1994), Belarus (since 1998), Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Kirghyzstan (since 1998), Armenia and Azerbaijan (since 2001), as well as in Serbia/Montenegro (since 2001). Paragraph 38 of the Istanbul Charter contains an indicative list of tasks that field missions can be called upon to carry out — tasks amounting to two distinct (although combinable) categories: assistance and support related to conflict management and assistance, advice and support concerning cross-dimensional matters (with special emphasis on human dimension matters).
Conflict management in the OSCE area: basic parameters

In the OSCE area, conflict management is characterized by a number of specific parameters, the most important of which concern the geopolitical zones of intervention, the nature of the conflicts addressed, the type of functions performed and inter-institutional cooperation:

Zones of intervention. Since its involvement in conflict management, the OSCE has deliberately avoided addressing conflictual situations not linked to the ripple effects of the collapse of Communism and which, at the same time, involve the member States of NATO and/or the European Union — such as Ulster, Cyprus, the Kurdish question in Turkey, the Bask problem in Spain, etc. As soon as the Putin administration took over, the Russian Federation stigmatized that ‘double standard policy’ targeting participating States located ‘East of Vienna’. At face value, the argument contains a grain of truth. It nevertheless overlooks the fact that third-party intervention is not needed everywhere, but first of all in those countries where the rule of law has no firm grounding and where domestic institutions are not fully effective or do not enjoy enough general public confidence. For that reason, the OSCE has only focused on conflictual situations (actual or potential) taking place either in the geopolitical space of the Former Soviet Union or in the sub-region of South Eastern Europe:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Former Soviet Union</th>
<th>South Eastern Europe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Asia: Tajikistan</td>
<td>Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia/Montenegro, Kosovo (Serbia/Montenegro)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasus: Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), South Ossetia (Georgia), Chechnya (Russia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central and Eastern Europe: Estonia, Latvia, Ukraine, Transdniestria (Moldova)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nature of conflicts. Conflictual situations managed by the OSCE have essentially been of an intrastate nature — with two major exceptions: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations since the end of 1999. Nearly all situations concern ethno-nationalism and, from this perspective, can be referred to as ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethnicized’ conflicts. ‘Ethnic’ conflicts involve communities opposed by language and/or religion (or both), that is to say the exclusive markers of ethnicity. For instance, rifts between Armenians and Azeris, Ossetians and Georgians, Chechens and Russians,

---


5 As demonstrated by the decoding of the human genome, ‘race’ is meaningless from a biological point of view. As such, it has to be considered as a totally irrelevant marker of ethnicity.