CIS Presidents attack the functioning of the OSCE

Arie Bloed with a supplement by Erika Schlager

1. CIS countries give OSCE a ‘final warning’
The heads of state of a number of CIS countries have put further pressure on the other OSCE states to listen to their complaints. At the beginning of July they gathered for a summit meeting in Moscow which resulted in a harshly worded declaration concerning their dissatisfaction with the present functioning of the OSCE. It is clear that a number of East European and Central Asian states have serious objections to the — in their view — ‘unbalanced’ approach of the OSCE in terms of geography (mainly devoting attention to problems east of Vienna) and substance (too much attention to human dimension issues), a situation that has already existed for several years. However, the summit declaration is of an unprecedented nature and signals a growing irritation concerning the OSCE criticism of their human rights record.

The CIS declaration was adopted on the 3rd of July at an unofficial summit meeting of the leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine. The president of Turkmenistan did not participate in the meeting and Azerbaijan and Georgia refused to sign the declaration. Although the nine presidents recognize that the OSCE has ‘a key place in the European security architecture’, the organization is blamed for not adapting itself to ‘the demands of a changing world’.

The declaration is quite remarkable as it blames the organization and its member states for violating fundamental principles such as non-interference in internal affairs and respect for state sovereignty. This is the more remarkable, since the non-intervention principle no longer applies in the OSCE. This was decided explicitly on several occasions with the consent of all OSCE participating states in the 1990s. However, the fact that the non-intervention principle is invoked time and again by a number of CIS countries towards the OSCE is politically significant, even though, formally it is completely unfounded.

The most serious complaints by the presidents of most CIS states relate to

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the perceived ‘imbalance’ between the three dimensions of the OSCE activities: ‘An obvious shifting of priorities can be observed in favour of the human dimension, something which appreciably restricts the OSCE’s capabilities for countering new threats and challenges.’ Frustration is also expressed about the ‘imbalance’ in geographic terms: ‘Giving selective, intensified attention to some countries while ignoring the problems of other participating States represents a violation of the OSCE’s mandate and testifies to the application of double standards and selective approaches within the Organization and an unwillingness to take into account the realities and specific features of individual countries.’

Anger is also expressed as to the activities of the OSCE missions: ‘The OSCE’s field activities, on which the predominant part of the Organization’s budget is spent, are not particularly effective. It is a matter for concern that the OSCE’s field missions focus their activities not on the basic provisions of their mandates, connected with helping and assisting the authorities of the receiving State over the full range of work covered by the Organization, but exclusively on monitoring human rights and democratic institutions. There have been cases of unfounded criticism by the heads of field missions of the domestic policies pursued by the governments of host countries.’

The heads of state of the respective CIS countries then conclude with a clear warning that their future cooperation with the OSCE’s human dimension activities will be conditional on the fulfilment of their wishes: ‘Elimination of the imbalance between the three dimensions of the Organization’s work as soon as possible, by increasing the role of the politico-military and economic and environmental components, is an item that must be placed on the OSCE’s agenda. As OSCE participating States, the undersigned CIS member States intend to make their future common approach to the Organization’s work, as regards its specialized institutions and field missions and also as regards the monitoring of election processes, subject to the Organization’s actual ability to adapt itself properly to the new conditions and the degree to which it is receptive to the concerns mentioned.’

The CIS statement caused some stir in Vienna, when the Russian Ambassador presented it at the Permanent Council meeting of the 8th of July. Since the OSCE will be facing some serious problems in the near future (the appointment of a new Secretary-General, the renegotiation of the scale of distribution of the budget), this does not bode not very well for finding smooth solutions.

At the end of July, the US Congressional CSCE Commission issued a statement which basically rejects the CIS complaints as being unfounded. It sent a letter to all nine presidents involved, explaining that all issues of complaints by them are already being intensively addressed within the OSCE. In the letter to President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, the Commission leaders stressed that they ‘were particularly troubled to see Kazakhstan included on the signatories to the declaration, since you have expressed an interest in undertaking the chairmanship of the organization [OSCE] in 2009.’

Something similar could be said about Kyrgyzstan’s president Akaev, who