OSCE CHRONICLE

The OSCE again finds itself in a budget crisis

Arie Bloed

1. The OSCE is facing heavy weather once again

The OSCE is going through another difficult phase in its existence and had to start the new year 2005 without an approved budget and a serious disagreement about the future of the organisation. The Ministerial meeting in Sofia did not bring about any substantial breakthrough in any of the major outstanding issues and, therefore, had to be concluded without a formal concluding document. This was already the second time that this has occurred, since the Maastricht Ministerial in December 2003 also faced the same fate. There, the Russian Federation blocked a ministerial document because the draft text included a number of issues which no longer wished to accept, including a reference to Russia’s 1999 Istanbul commitments, which obliged the country to withdraw its troops from Georgia and Moldova.

The main outstanding issues concern the ‘reform’ of the organisation. This issue has become a ticking time bomb, since the Russians have made it clear that without reform, corresponding to their wishes, they will not consent to progress in other areas and would block the adoption of a budget for 2005. The Russians, officially backed by a number of more authoritarian CIS countries, but in practice mainly by Belarus, are of the opinion that the OSCE suffers from serious ‘imbalances’ in its work. These imbalances are both geographical and thematic: they accuse the organisation of focusing mainly on the former socialist countries and devoting a disproportionate attention to human dimension issues. Therefore, the proposal is to pay much more attention to the politico-security and economic issues.

Another issue is the OSCE’s important work in the area of election monitoring which is becoming an increasingly delicate issue after the Rose and Orange ‘revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine. The CIS now has its own ‘election monitoring organisation’ which is active in the field and recently also in Ukraine. In contrast to the OSCE observers who considered the first and second round of the presidential elections in Ukraine to be not free and unfair, the CIS observers praised the democratic character of these elections and endorsed the victory of the former Prime Minister

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Yanukovich. The OSCE election monitoring, conducted by the relatively autonomous Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, are clearly a target in the Russian efforts to ‘reform’ the OSCE by bringing ODIHR’s activities completely under the control of the participating states, in other words: thanks to the consensus principle, more under Russian control. Another contentious issue is the functioning of the OSCE’s missions which – in Russian eyes – focus too much on political and human rights issues, also thanks to the fact that the missions have discretionary powers over the voluntary contributions of the participating states. The Russian Federation wants to see these voluntary contributions become part of the OSCE’s unified budget and, therefore, will fall under the full control of the countries of residence concerned.

The Russians have made it abundantly clear that without progress in introducing their ‘reform’ wishes, the organisation will be their hostage. On 13 January, the Russian representative in the Permanent Council of the OSCE stated: ‘The situation has reached the critical point, and any further delay in reforming the organisation would bring grave political consequences upon the OSCE. (…) This year can either mark a turning point toward a renewed OSCE, or see it pushed farther toward the periphery of European politics.’ He also indicated that Russia would continue to make use of its refusal to approve a budget as its ‘leverage’ to get its ‘reform’ proposals adopted. This implies that the organisation does not have a new budget, even though the new year has already started and it seems that a painful similar event (to that in 2001) is going to be repeated.

It is obvious that the new Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, the Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitri Rupel, has inherited a problematic legacy and will have great problems in solving the existing crisis. At the same Permanent Council meeting in January, Mr. Rupel indicated that more balanced attention and resources should be devoted to all three dimensions of the OSCE’s comprehensive approach to security — the politico-military, economic and environmental, and the human dimension. However, ‘at the same time our commitment to the human dimension must remain,’ he said. ‘The human dimension is at the core of OSCE activities and we cannot afford to erode our common principles and commitments.’

It does not require much imagination to understand why also on several other issues no consensus could be reached at the Sofia Ministerial. Although there was the hope that it could decide on the appointment of a new Secretary General for the organisation, consensus could not be reached. The main candidates at the moment seem to be from Switzerland, France and Albania. The present Secretary General, Ambassador Jan Kubis, will leave his post in June this year after serving the organisation for two consecutive terms of three years.

2. The OSCE has to stop its Border Monitoring Operation in Georgia
Due to the Russian refusal to renew its mandate, one of the OSCE’s more successful operations has to be closed down: the Border Monitoring Operation in Georgia which is monitoring the Georgian borders with the Russian republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan from the Georgian side. In the past Russia has frequently