OSCE assistance for police has to be strengthened

Arie Bloed

Support for police reform and police training has become an increasingly important issue for the OSCE. Actually, it is somewhat surprising that this topic was ‘discovered’ only at the end of the 1990s, when the OSCE Summit in Istanbul (1999) decided that the organization should enhance its police-related activities beyond what was already being done in Croatia and Kosovo. The reason is that assistance for the police is an essential instrument not only for the prevention of (ethnic) conflicts, but also for the promotion of human rights. At the Bucharest Ministerial in December 2001 further attention was given to this highly important aspect of the work of the OSCE.

The OSCE is well placed to undertake various forms of police support in its participating states. Not only does its comprehensive security mandate constitute a perfect basis for this work, but also its flexibility which allows it to react quickly, whenever (urgent) needs arise. Besides, it seems to be the only international organization which would allow a long-term commitment, which is crucial, since police reform requires an involvement over a longer period of time in order to bring about sustainable results. Other international organizations lack either the comprehensive mandate or operate so bureaucratically that a rapid involvement is only a theoretical possibility. Therefore, the OSCE, with its proven value in the area of conflict prevention and crisis management, is the ideal setting for undertaking efforts to address this politically sensitive issue.

Why is assistance for police reform a core issue for the OSCE? When answering this question it might be useful to make a comparison with the mandate of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). Although his mandate is strictly of a conflict prevention nature, aimed at reducing tensions relating to national minority issues, it goes without saying that the HCNM’s main tool for achieving this aim is a proper implementation of the standards for the protection of persons belonging to national minorities. In other words: the mandate of the HCNM is an ideal combination of the OSCE’s politico-military and human dimensions. This is exactly the same, when considering the aim of the OSCE’s police assistance activities.

First of all, support for police reform is not just support for law enforcement, but serves a much more important goal: professional and modern law enforcement in a country and region is very important for maintaining law and order and, therefore, stability within a society. Support for police reform therefore addresses one of the most important goals of the OSCE: guaranteeing stability and security in the Eurasian area and preventing conflicts. The role of the police in this area can hardly be overestimated. The total collapse of the police on the 24th of March of

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this year in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, plunging the capital into complete chaos, can serve as a perfect example of this observation. Another good example is the major OSCE support for the Macedonian police after the conflict in 2001 between the ethnic Albanians and Macedonians. Only thanks to the introduction of community policing and the training of a substantial group of Albanian police officers, could the central government take control of the whole territory of the country once again, demonstrating the great importance of police work for maintaining or re-establishing law and order and, therefore, stability in the country and the whole region.

At the same time assistance for police reform is an essential element of the human dimension of the OSCE. A service-oriented police organization is essential for the protection of the human rights of all citizens, irrespective of whether they are rich or poor, powerful or weak. A professional and modern police organization cannot be achieved without combating corruption, torture, abuse of power and, in general, unprofessional behaviour within the police. Only in this way can a professional police force be created which serves not only the interests of the state order, but also of all individual citizens. Therefore, it is simply the truth to state that professional policing and human rights are just two sides of one and the same coin. Moreover, the work of the police is essential for upholding the rule of law, which requires an autonomous, professional and well-trained police force, whereas a badly functioning police would undermine the essence of the rule of law and, therefore, would quickly become part of the problem.

There is yet another reason why assistance for police reform belongs to the core tasks of the OSCE. Traditionally, the organization provides support for the training of judges, prosecutors, prison officers, lawyers and other professional groups in various countries, thereby focusing on important actors in the criminal justice system. However, without addressing the police, such efforts will never be effective. The organization cannot address just one or two elements of the criminal justice system without paying attention to the other parts. Therefore, if the OSCE — through programmes of well thought out assistance — can assist in the development of a professional and effective Criminal Justice System including, in particular, also the police, it will have contributed to the first and perhaps most important building block of Good Governance, namely the Rule of Law.

Assistance for police reform in a country is therefore not just a technical matter, but belongs to the heart of the OSCE mandate. However, also in this area the potential and ambitions of the OSCE extend far beyond the actual capacity, as there is a huge disparity between the tasks and the available resources.

Finally, it is important to note the relevance of police reform in the context of the fight against terrorism. In particular community policing is an effective, long-term tool to undermine the basis which terrorists may have in society, as community policing aims at police work in close partnership with the local communities, based on mutual confidence and trust. Intensive relations between a professional, human-rights oriented police force and the communities, therefore, have a great potential in simply reducing the circumstances within which terrorist groups may flourish.