Ten lessons for running OSCE field missions in the future

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The OSCE decision in 1992 that opened up the possibility of deploying field missions was in retrospect one of the most important ones in the history of the organization. The missions have become such an important part of the work of the organization that they have in many ways come to define the OSCE. Many of the most productive and most difficult discussions that have been held in the OSCE have related to the work of different field missions. The missions have allowed the OSCE to play a role of historical importance in the post-conflict rehabilitation of the countries in Southeastern Europe and in the transition of many of the new democracies in Central and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The missions have given the OSCE some clear advantages over most other organizations engaged in similar issues: only the OSCE has had a commitment to maintaining a solid and focused presence related to political issues and human rights commitments in the transition countries over a long period of time, and the OSCE has more clearly than most other international actors combined advice at the political or abstract level with very down-to-earth support for the implementation of various human rights commitments. In many cases, the missions have established a close and successful working relationship with other international organizations, which will inevitably be an important factor when the OSCE continues to formalize its overall relations with organizations such as the EU, the Council of Europe and the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

However, the missions are also faced with many limitations. The effectiveness of each mission largely depends on a close relationship based on trust and shared objectives with the authorities of the host country. The activities have to be coordinated with other international organizations in order to ensure, at best, that the organizations support each other and take advantage of synergies and, at a minimum, that they avoid working at cross-purposes. The missions need strong support from within the organization, not only administrative support from the secretariat and coordination on substantive issues with the different OSCE institutions, but also political support from the participating states on a range of issues from minute details in the budget allocation process to the strategic direction of the missions. Finally, the missions are often being constrained by a shift of priorities within the OSCE toward various cross-border issues and new tasks such as measures to combat trafficking and the fight against terrorism.

As I have led two OSCE Missions — in Latvia and Croatia — over the course of the last five years, I have often faced issues of this kind. I have had to position the

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missions — not only within the host countries but also within the OSCE and vis-à-vis other international organizations — in order to secure adequate resources, to put those resources to the most effective use, and to concentrate on the tasks where the OSCE can make a real difference. I have spent much effort convincing the authorities in the two countries that the missions were assets that represented generous offers of assistance and countering the notion that the presence of a mission is a stigma. This has not been an easy road to take, and I have learned many lessons along the way. Here are the ten most important ones.

First lesson
Make everything possible — regardless of how difficult it is — to develop common objectives and even a partnership with the host government. In Croatia we did this by inviting the government to comment on draft versions of important mission reports and by working out a detailed Mission Activity Plan, which was also discussed with the government. This transparent and interactive process enhanced mutual confidence as well as the respect that the mission enjoyed among both the government and civil society. The partnership did not exclude confrontation on individual issues. Once mutual trust and respect had been established, it was obvious that some confrontation would not hurt the working relationship; on the contrary, it was sometimes even welcome that the OSCE pushed some politically difficult issues where the government hesitated to face the inevitable political heat by itself. Obviously, it will not be possible to emulate this experience in all countries, but I believe it could be helpful to think about shared objectives and a partnership as an advanced stage in a mission life cycle that stretches from a monitoring phase (immediately after the war in Croatia) via advice and support (the period following the first democratic change of government in 2000) to a partnership (following the last change of government in 2003).

Second lesson
Position the OSCE mission as a facilitator where the domestic actors have difficulties in communicating. This role is important in post-totalitarian and post-authoritarian societies, where civil society is still seeking to find its role including communication channels to the government. In my experience, the most important aspect of this facilitation is how it is presented in public. Different actors often do not have any problems communicating behind the scenes, while it is more difficult for them to legitimize controversial steps in the eyes of their respective constituencies, in particular if those constituencies are conditioned by war experiences and other traumas. For example, by maintaining a very public supportive position, the mission to Croatia has facilitated the historic agreement between the ruling party HDZ and the Serb members of parliament after the last election in Croatia, and it has supported the role of domestic NGOs on electoral issues.

Third lesson
Emphasize the OSCE acquis in order to enhance legitimacy and reinforce messages