The bumpy road from norm-setting to implementation

Nadia Milanova

Reform is the talk of the day among people who work for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), live for it and care about its future. Thirty years in existence is a period which is long enough to provide a sound basis for deliberations on the role, mission and structure of the organization. After all, it is not unusual to lead an international organization towards transformation in order to keep pace with the changing realities and newly emerging challenges. With the OSCE, however, the talks have been unfolding against growing apprehension that this road towards reform is a symptom of political divisions and a sign of attempts to entangle the organization in old-style agenda setting.

The decision to commence discussions on the OSCE reform was taken at the Sofia Ministerial Council in December 2004 as a reaction to criticism levelled by Russia and other CIS countries. The Moscow and the Astana declarations argued that the OSCE is functionally flawed by focusing too narrowly on democracy issues at the expense of widescale European military-security issues and by perpetuating the geographic imbalance of the agenda by continuously focusing on political developments in the post-Soviet area, thereby ignoring human rights violations in other countries. While there is no doubt that the OSCE’s efficiency and performance should be improved, it is important to set the right priorities at the right time. The C/OSCE has had a unique history of agenda and norm setting over the years. Having had concerns for human rights at the core of its beliefs and principles, the conference — transformed into an organization — has moved ahead of its time in a rather inspiring manner. Does it now need to abandon its core values or does it have to consider ways to consolidate their implementation? This article will seek to explore these questions.

Decoupling human rights and security — is it the right direction?

The OSCE will be subjected to major transformation, provided that the current drive towards reform is predicated on the premise that the organization’s predominant preoccupation with human rights diverts attention from issues in the areas of security and economy. The attempts by some participating states to decouple human rights from security issues come at a time when the international community is increasingly concerned with how to promulgate the concept of ‘human security’ in an effort to bring attention to the need to protect people and their rights and to empower them to act on their own behalf. The United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 launched the idea of an independent Commission for

1 Nadia Milanova, PhD is former Head of the Prague Office of the OSCE Secretariat, currently working for the Brussels-based Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.
Human Security to elaborate on the scope of the concept and to propose a framework of activities to address present-day fears and threats. Setting the agenda, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan identified ‘freedom from want’, ‘freedom from fear’ and ‘freedom of future generations to inherit a healthy natural environment’ as the interrelated building blocks of human, and therefore national, security.

The introduction of the human security concept can be construed as one of the attempts to rethink the international system within its new dimensions. The shift from interstate to intrastate conflicts and the proliferation of non-state sources of insecurity have deprived the system of its ability to resort to internationally prescribed mechanisms for collective security. It is where the human security concept steps in to provide the basis for further discussions on how to adjust the international response to new threats to security stemming from the status of insecurity of vulnerable, impoverished, and underprivileged groups of people.

The concept of human security is not rigidly defined when compared to the elaborately defined notions of national and state security. The scope of its applicability can be rather broad as it is discussed in order to integrate several agenda items — peace, security and development — and to encompass a wide range of issues such as human rights, good governance, access to education and health care. Steven Lonergan has observed that ‘human security is achieved when and where individuals and communities have the options necessary to end, mitigate, or adapt to threats to their human, environmental, and social rights; and have the capacity and freedom to exercise these options and actively participate in attaining these options’.

Human rights and human security both complement and reinforce each other. While human rights are one of the main components and building blocks of human security, they also provide a sound conceptual and normative foundation for the human security concept. On the other side, human security helps to identify the rights at stake in a particular situation.

This ongoing notional shift in the concept of security testifies to the legitimacy and significance of the C/OSCE ideas developed over a number of decades and stipulated in its normative documents. Though the term ‘human security’ is not part of OSCE parlance, the concept itself has been an integral part

---