COLUMNS

OSCE reform requires bold decisions

Arie Bloed

The debate on the ‘reform’ of the OSCE, which has already lingered on for several years, recently entered a new phase. After a Panel of Eminent Persons (PEP) — usually referred to as the Group of Wise Men — presented its recommendations at the end of June this year, High-Level Consultations took place at the beginning of September. These consultations were preceded by two international conferences, one of which was organized by Helsinki Monitor on the 9th of September in the Hofburg in Vienna and which attracted quite some attention.

It became clear from the debate at the HM conference that a consensus about the future development of the OSCE is still far from reality, as serious disagreements continue to exist. Nevertheless, it also seems that some kind of agreement about the OSCE’s future role is beginning to appear. There was quite some appreciation for the report of the PEP which itself was the result by consensus between the seven Wise Men (women were not included in the group).

A common purpose

The title of the PEP report ‘Common purpose’ echoed through the Hofburg during the conference. However, it also became clear that this title can be interpreted in different ways. The Panel calls for a sense of common purpose to be rekindled among the participating states as the starting point for the reform debate. But at the conference another kind of ‘common purpose’ was also strongly emphasized: the need to find a common purpose, not just among the OSCE states, but in particular also for and among the people these states are supposed to represent. The reason is that the OSCE is not just an intergovernmental organization, but that it continues to be the symbol of freedom and democracy for many ordinary people who are living in the OSCE participating states. That creates a certain ‘tension’ which will undoubtedly continue to exist. When the discussion on the reform of the OSCE is ongoing, it is important for all those involved to realize that they do not merely represent their states, but that in the end they represent ordinary people.

1 This column is based on the concluding remarks by Arie Bloed at the HM Conference on OSCE Reform in Vienna on the 9th of September 2005. See also the report of the conference entitled Life begins at 30, Netherlands Helsinki Committee, 2005. Arie Bloed is the former Executive Director of the Constitutional and Legal Policy Institute (COLPI), Budapest, and Editor-in-Chief of Helsinki Monitor.
Column

who often have high expectations concerning the OSCE and its work. And that is and will remain a core issue for the OSCE in the time to come.

Community of values
Over the years, the OSCE has created a community of values. These values have been confirmed and reconfirmed time and again, also in the report by the PEP. But we have to keep in mind that, after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, not everything remained the same in relation to the OSCE’s fundamental principles which guide relations among the participating states. In this regard the non-intervention principle requires particular attention. That principle has been officially put to one side on various occasions at summit-level in the OSCE in 1990, 1991 and 1992. One cannot ignore this fact, even though, at present, some OSCE states have started to invoke this principle once again in order to avoid international scrutiny concerning their actions. Although this can be taken as a fact of life, it is an outright violation of OSCE commitments and it seriously undermines the OSCE as a community of responsibility as well.

At the HM conference a discussion took place concerning the OSCE’s basic concept of cooperative security and whether this is still a valid notion at the present time, when some of its participating states are being accused of systematic violations of the OSCE’s commitments and when these same states are not willing to address these problems in a ‘cooperative’ spirit. It became clear that this issue has to be approached with great care. Even though the idea of replacing ‘cooperative security’ with more coercive means might be attractive to some observers, it also became clear that this might affect the very basis of the OSCE’s functioning and, therefore, could have paradoxical results. The conclusion was that one should be extremely careful in changing this basic concept of the OSCE’s functioning. A similar sentiment seemed to prevail concerning the idea of the expulsion or suspension of participating states due to their systematic violation of the OSCE’s commitments.

A better balance
What was also clear was that a better balance has to be found within the OSCE, geographically (between ‘East of Vienna’ and ‘West of Vienna’), but also ‘cross-dimensionally’. There are many important issues on the OSCE agenda, identified also by the PEP, that are neither confined to the human dimension nor to the political/security dimension. They, let us say, cross the border, and, actually, that does not fit the present structure of the organization. The organization is strictly structured along the lines of the so-called dimensions, or baskets, and this would require urgent attention in the reform debate.

Time to focus
It also became clear that it is necessary to reconsider the extended agenda which the OSCE has developed over the years. The OSCE’s present agenda encompasses almost everything that one might think of. It seems that the time really has come...