Between contribution and disengagement: Post-conflict elections and the OSCE role in the normalization of armed groups and militarized political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tajikistan, and Kosovo

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Introduction
In the last three decades, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has performed a pioneering role in the promotion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In the post-Cold War era, the advancement of democratic elections has emerged as a successful niche in which the OSCE, through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), has developed a distinctive expertise. The OSCE and ODIHR’s ground-breaking work has been highly instructive for other multilateral organizations.² Nonetheless, the role played in certifying the compliance with the procedural standards and the fulfilment of basic conditions leading to seemingly free and fair elections has not been matched by a comparable involvement in substantial political issues, such as the impact of elections on domestic politics.

In the context of post-conflict peacebuilding, elections can bring about innovative dynamics conducive to the re-establishment of a legitimate government and the emergence of new political subjects resulting from the transformation of armed organizations into effective political parties. Elections provide a strong institutional incentive as they encourage armed groups to seek their goals in the mainstream political arena rather than on the battlefield.³ Previous contributions to the study of armed groups have sought to identify the

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² See Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers, Commemorated on 27 October 2005, at the United Nations (UN), New York. The document has been endorsed by the major organizations active in the field of election observation – among which are the OSCE, the UN, the European Commission, the African Union, the Organization of American States, the Carter Center, and International IDEA. The declaration has incorporated some of the principles that have been a trademark of the OSCE and appear in the OSCE Election Observation Handbook. See OSCE / ODIHR ‘Election Observation Handbook’ – 5th Edition’, Warsaw, 2005.

³ In the article the expression ‘armed groups’ is intended to include insurgent movements (Tajikistan and Kosovo) as well as militarized political parties (Bosnia and Herzegovina).
factors prompting the normalization of opposition movements. By arguing that political actors’ behaviours are affected by domestic incentives and the intra-organizational developments that follow war-to-peace transitions, these studies fail to notice the impact of external factors. As the tragedy of Angola or the troubled post-war recovery in Liberia and Sierra Leone suggest, the commitment to peaceful and competitive politics by former armed movements is a long and challenging process that, in the short-term, is potentially reversible.

The role of international actors can be crucial in accommodating some of the political controversies by and large associated with peace processes. In post-conflict situations the OSCE has assumed the role of a neutral and contained observer concentrating most of its efforts on the observation or supervision of electoral processes. On the contrary, in order to assert its political role, the UN has interpreted post-settlement mandates in a more proactive fashion: it has pressured domestic actors to comply with the peace accord, at times directing the transformation of armed oppositions into political parties (El Salvador, Mozambique), or conducting the entire electoral process and managing post-election tensions (Cambodia). Notwithstanding some moderate successes in assisting conflict-ridden countries, international engagement is still conceived within a rigorously short-term agenda. When domestic actors have not been engaged in a long-term reform platform, external contributions to the restructuring of the state were to be scattered and superficial due to the mere concentration on the formal aspects of democracy.

The transformation of armed groups into political parties: the OSCE track record

The missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tajikistan, and Kosovo stand among the most relevant field operations in which the OSCE has been involved. In Bosnia the three ethno-nationalist parties posed a paramount challenge to the peace agreement and its overwhelming goal of restoring a multiethnic society. The peace accord ending the civil war in Tajikistan encompassed the establishment of a multi-party political system but regional power struggles and peculiar security dynamics complicated the emergence of valid political

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5 The article focuses mainly on political issues but it is widely acknowledged that the military dimension of OSCE field activities has been relevant.
