Vollebaek the new High Commissioner on National Minorities

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Addendum by Erika Schlager2

1. New High Commissioner on National Minorities appointed
The former Foreign Minister of Norway, Ambassador Knut Vollebaek, has been appointed as the OSCE’s High Commissioner on National Minorities as of the beginning of July 2007. He is the successor of the Swedish Ambassador Rolf Ekeus who held the post for the past six years. The first High Commissioner was the former Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, Max van der Stoel, who retained the position from 1993 until 2001 and developed the HCNM post into one of the main conflict prevention instruments of the organization. When he left the post, the HCNM was generally considered to be the ‘flagship’ of the OSCE which assisted in de-escalating tensions involving national minority issues in several places in Central and Eastern Europe and, to a lesser extent, in Central Asia. Ekeus’ tenure has been much less conspicuous, partially undoubtedly due to the fact that inter-ethnic tensions in the OSCE area in this decade are in a way less ‘hot’ than in the 1990s and partially due to his personality. Remarkably, Ekeus continued to spend a considerable amount of time on quite a few other issues (e.g. the investigation of Russian submarines in Swedish coastal waters), whereas Van der Stoel had to dispense with all his side-activities when he took up his position. Ekeus also retained his interest in Iraq (his previous position) to such an extent that during his numerous visits to the US, he reportedly regularly visited the Iraq desk in the State Department, but sometimes ‘forgot’ to consult the Europe desk, which is dealing with OSCE issues. During his whole period as the HCNM he reportedly did not even pay a visit to the quite influential US Congressional Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe on a single occasion.

The new HCNM has a thorough knowledge of the OSCE, as Vollebaek was the Norwegian Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE in 1999, the year of the Kosovo Verification Mission and the Kosovo war. In that year he had intensive contacts with the leaders of many OSCE states and he also became quite familiar with the

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Central Asian region. This will be a substantial asset for him, since inter-ethnic tensions in and between the five Central Asian republics, belonging to the OSCE, are fairly high. Besides, the Norwegian chairmanship is looked upon as being a very successful one. Therefore, the expectations surrounding the new HCNM are quite high.

The appointment of the new HCNM is the result of a remarkably different nomination process under the guidance of the Spanish Chairmanship. In the past the appointment of candidates for the highest positions in the organization has resulted in serious frictions and frustrations among several OSCE states, as these processes were generally lacking in any transparency. The efforts by the Spaniards to make the HCNM nomination process much more transparent can only be seen as a welcome development. Due to this process quite soon only three candidates remained in the running (from the Netherlands, Norway and Poland), with the Norwegian candidate acquiring consensus in the end.

A positive aspect of the nomination process is also that during this round no less than three former foreign ministers were candidates, which clearly reflects the political significance which OSCE participating states attach to the function. This is a striking difference with the beginning of this decade, when several candidates for Van der Stoel’s succession were generally of lesser calibre.

2. First OSCE Meeting in Mongolia

For the first time in its history the OSCE organized a meeting in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, in June, where the organization discussed with its five Asian partners how mutual co-operation could be strengthened. The OSCE’s Asian partners are Afghanistan, Japan, South Korea, Thailand and since 2004 also Mongolia.

It is the OSCE habit to organize meetings with its Partners for Co-operation (the official name for the OSCE’s observer states) on the territory of these Partners and now Mongolia has had the privilege to welcome the delegates from the 56 OSCE states and its other Partners for Co-operation. Although officially much attention was given to the fact that the OSCE cannot work in isolation and that its immediate surroundings are very important for achieving the OSCE’s security goals, the observership status does not bring much more substantial benefits to the Partners than a regular exchange of information.

At the Ulaanbaatar meeting a wide range of topics were covered, including themes such as land degradation, soil contamination and water management, important topics for the Central Asian OSCE States, but also for the Asian Partners for Co-operation. However, it is unclear whether the meeting in Mongolia has produced concrete outcomes, which is often quite unclear with OSCE seminars in general. But it definitely was a good opportunity for Mongolia to put itself more on the OSCE map. This has already happened on other occasions, for instance at an OSCE-organized conference on community policing in Kyrgyzstan. The Mongolian police delegation made quite an impression during that occasion, as Mongolia already started to introduce community policing in 2000 and has achieved interesting results with it.