The OSCE role in Albania:
A success for conflict prevention?

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Introduction
In March-April 1997, Albania seemed about to join the small group of 'failed states' where government authority breaks down, clans and local warlords exercise power and a protracted breakdown of sovereignty threatens regional security as well as the indigenous population. An estimated 140,000 weapons from ransacked garrisons and police stations had fallen into private hands. The authority of the police had collapsed in large parts of the country, and the army was no longer responsive to the President's demands.

Yet by July-August, the OSCE was presiding over new elections, in which all the major parties agreed to participate. The OSCE declared the elections 'adequate and acceptable', and a change of government was effected which won both international and domestic legitimacy. The Italian-led intervention force, Operation Alba, was able to leave in August, having achieved the purpose for which it was sent.

Has this been a success for conflict prevention? If so, how was it achieved, what was the OSCE role, and what can we conclude for future OSCE interventions in internal conflicts?

'Light' and 'deep' conflict prevention
The OSCE has taken on a range of responsibilities in relation to conflicts within member states, including monitoring human rights and security, providing early warnings of conflicts, preventing conflicts, managing crises, and post-conflict peace-building.1 Its conflict prevention role is conceived within the framework of the comprehensive security concept, so that measures not only of a diplomatic-military character but also support for human rights, democratic institutions and economic development are seen as part of an integrated programme. Interventions to prevent conflict have broadened from diplomatic démarches at times of crisis to a continuous process of monitoring and review of the internal governance of member states, leading under agreed conditions to the establishment of missions and monitors, sometimes for a protracted period.

Nevertheless a useful distinction can still be drawn between 'light' and 'deep' conflict prevention. The former is in the hands of diplomats and senior officials from foreign ministries. It consists of high-level diplomatic interventions, conferences, round tables, political pressure on leaders, warnings, threats and promises, and if necessary other measures. The aim is to prevent an escalation of political conflict or to bring about de-escalation, without

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necessarily addressing the deep roots of the conflict. ‘Deep’ conflict prevention in contrast addresses itself to the deep-rooted and structural sources of internal conflict, which may include weak governance, poor human rights, economic deprivation and a lack of legitimate institutions capable of accommodating social change.

‘Light’ conflict prevention is a matter of the international community’s capacity to intervene in situations of conflict or potential conflict; ‘deep’ conflict prevention is a matter of developing society’s domestic capacity to manage its own conflicts.

The OSCE is only one of a number of bodies, including the major western governments, the UN and NATO, which were concerned with the Albanian crisis of 1997. It is also only one of a number of bodies which have attempted to address Albania’s more deep-rooted problems. The Soros Foundation, the American Bar Association and Dutch development agencies have been active on the NGO side, while the Council of Europe is another intergovernmental agency with a significant programme. It is difficult to attribute ‘success’ or ‘failure’ to the OSCE alone, since its interventions were clearly orchestrated with other western policies.

This article argues that the Albanian intervention of 1997 was a remarkable success for ‘light’ conflict prevention, although the external intervention should be seen as a contributing factor rather than the determinant of events. However, the fact that the crisis reached the point it did, suggests the weakness of earlier western policy. This policy did little to support the agencies involved in efforts to achieve ‘deep’ conflict prevention, which still have a long way to go.

In order to make this assessment, it is necessary first to distinguish the long-term sources of social instability in Albania from the immediate causes of the crisis in March.

**Deep-rooted sources of potential conflict**

The background to Albania’s partial collapse as a state in 1997 lies in its turbulent political history in this century, its isolation from the world economy and consequent underdevelopment, and its particular difficulties in making the post-communist transition.2

Albania suffered the harshest and most protracted of all the Stalinist regimes and its transition from Stalinism to a multi-party market economy, via a brief period of communist relaxation under Ramiz Alia, was the most abrupt in Central and Eastern Europe. It coincided with the collapse of state industry and a remarkable outburst of destruction in which the people stole or smashed up state property. The ragged and malnourished refugees who arrived off the

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