The OSCE and the Kosovo crisis

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1. The Kosovo crisis

The international community has been following the developing crisis in Kosovo, the largely Albanian-populated area in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) with growing concern. In spite of promises by the Yugoslav President Milosevic to halt the military operations by the Serbian security forces and in spite of massive international pressure on the Yugoslav authorities, the large-scale violence against the Kosovo Liberation Army’s fighters continued.

This indicates that the influence of the international community has been quite limited, in spite of sometimes threatening words. The role of the OSCE does not form an exception to this general picture. Although the OSCE has taken some useful steps, in particular to avoid a spread of the conflict to neighbouring countries, it has been unable to halt the bloodshed and the creation of massive flows of mainly Albanian refugees in the region.

The OSCE mission in Albania has been strengthened considerably in order to monitor the border region in the north of the country. The mission noted a steady stream of refugees crossing the border from the FRY, until the territory in Kosovo, bordering Albania, was more or less sealed off by the Serbian forces. From the vantage points in the mountains in the north of Albania, the OSCE mission also observed tank movements, artillery shelling, attacks by helicopter gunships and the devastation of villages on the Yugoslav side of the border. The number of mission monitors increased to thirty. A new field office and several sub-offices were opened in the north of Albania.

Also on the Macedonian side of the joint border between Kosovo and Macedonia the OSCE Spill-Over Mission in Skopje closely monitored the developments. In contrast to the border region with Albania, the Mission did not report developments which gave rise to extra concern.

On the political level, the OSCE issued several statements with urgent calls to both parties to halt the hostilities, but without much noticeable effect. On 11 June, for instance, the Polish Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Foreign Minister Geremek, deplored 'the excessive and indiscriminate use of force by Serb military and police units which has brought the crisis to the brink of war and threatens international peace and security.'

Another political initiative was a visit to the region by an OSCE ‘Assessment Mission’ from 14 to 22 July. The Technical Assessment Mission, headed by the German OSCE Ambassador Eiff, included representatives from the OSCE Troika, the Contact Group, the European Union Presidency (Austria) and some others.
The mission concluded that the need for the rapid re-establishment of the OSCE long-term missions in Kosovo, Sandjak and Vojvodina has remained the same. The mission expressed its regret that the Belgrade authorities are only willing to accept these missions on its territory if the FRY is readmitted to the OSCE. Yugoslavia has been suspended from membership of the OSCE since May 1992.

2. Police monitors in Croatia
In October this year the OSCE will commence a totally new activity in its history by deploying civilian police monitors on the territory of Eastern Slavonia in Croatia. This territory, with a large Serbian population, was reintegrated into Croatia in January of this year. At that time the UN peacekeepers (UNTAES) were withdrawn and replaced by the UN Police Support Group. On the 15th of October the OSCE will take over this task. It will be the first time that the OSCE will have taken on a police monitoring role. Its mandate will include not only the monitoring of operational aspects of traditional police work, but also providing assistance and expertise to Croatian police and other law enforcement authorities in dealing with issues including community-oriented policing and protecting the human rights of displaced persons, refugees and national minorities.

The civilian police force is one of the measures taken by the international community to provide some protection to the mainly Serbian population of the region, hoping that this could prevent a mass exodus of people. Nevertheless, there has been a steady stream of people leaving for Serbia-Montenegro, also as a result of the often rather aggressive attitude of the Croat authorities towards them.

3. Netherlands initiative on the human dimension
For several months the Dutch government has been working on an initiative to intensify the cooperation between the Council of Europe and the OSCE in the field of the human dimension. On the 5th of June it organized a seminar on an 'Alliance for Human Rights and Democracy' in The Hague, where a great number of participants from OSCE states exchanged opinions on this topic. It resulted in a report to the Permanent Council which was presented at the PC meeting of 9 July. The report contains a great number of ideas for improving cooperation, although it is clear that no consensus exists. Many of these suggestions are also not very revolutionary, but they could indeed contribute to a better cooperation and coordination. One of the ideas is that the coordination in the capitals of the member states should be streamlined, for instance, by having one team coordinate both organizations. This would stop the fact that nowadays the same countries express different opinions in the two organizations, as different departments in the ministries for foreign affairs deal with OSCE and Council of Europe. A useful suggestion is also that the two organizations and the Parliamentary Assemblies of both organizations should speak with one voice in the context of the monitoring of elections and that, therefore, no conflicting opinions should be presented. Although this is highly desirable, it remains to be seen how this could be achieved in practice.