Elections cause turmoil in several OSCE countries

The recent period has abundantly shown why the OSCE as a security organization is focusing strongly on the observation of (national) elections and on improving the legislative framework for elections. The reasoning behind this is that only free and fair elections can create the basis for stable democracies and, therefore, peace and security in the OSCE region.

Although some Western countries consider the organization of elections to be some kind of recipe for lots of (political) diseases, elections in several countries in the OSCE region in the past six months could offer a different perspective. Some observers may argue that elections can also be the cause of serious political turmoil, as shown by events in countries like Georgia, Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyzstan. Even when independent Western election observers consider the outcome of national elections to be more or less fair and as reflecting the ‘will of the people’, in spite of some irregularities, the opposition sometimes continues to organize strong protests, pretending that the results of the elections are fraudulent. This happened, in particular, in Georgia and Armenia. In Georgia, President Mikhail Saakashvili decided on a snap election for his contested presidency at the end of last year which he won with an absolute majority in January. The OSCE observers considered the elections to be not without some serious shortcomings, but nevertheless fair. In spite of this, the opposition continues to call people out on to the streets and refuses to recognize the re-elected President, causing serious problems and instability in the country. This is not a good sign for the forthcoming parliamentary elections which will be held later this spring.

A similar situation developed in Armenia, where the OSCE considered the presidential elections on the 19th of February to be more or less fair, in spite of some serious shortcomings. Nevertheless, the opposition headed by the former President Lev-Petrosian refused to recognize the outcome, leading to massive street protests. The unrest was quelled by the authorities through the use of brutal force, allegedly resulting in eight people killed. At the same time an emergency

1  Arie Bloed is Editor-in-Chief of Security and Human Rights.
situation was declared with a total ban on the free media. The OSCE tries to mediate and calls on all parties to use restraint, but it is unlikely that the unrest will soon calm down.

Kyrgyzstan offered a somewhat different example. The new president Bakiev, who succeeded the ousted Akaev in 2005, managed to get the electoral system amended in such a way that he can now boast of a virtual one-party parliament. The election in November last year was widely regarded as highly flawed (at least by the OSCE monitors, while the CIS delegation had only praise for the elections) and it also triggered street protests by the opposition which hardly managed to get a seat in the new parliament. A heavy-hand approach managed to bring back some calm on the streets, but under the surface the tensions are rising. The long-time, outgoing Head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, Ambassador Markus Mueller, felt obliged to raise a strong voice at the end of December, just before leaving his post: ‘According to the findings of the OSCE/ODIHR and other observers, the elections failed to meet a number of the Kyrgyz Republic’s OSCE commitments. Furthermore, the exclusion of the party that came second clearly contradicts the democratic principle of inclusiveness and the respect of the people’s choice’. Ambassador Mueller added that he deplored the disproportionate use of force by the police and the unjustified arrests of NGO and human rights activists who demonstrated against the improper organization of the elections. The revolution which caused the previous president Akaev to flee the country in 1995 clearly failed to put a more democratic system in place. The present regime is considered to be at least as corrupt as its predecessor and it abuses its power to the same extent. The judicial system, the freedom of the media and its vibrant civil society are again the main victims of the present regime. Observers fear that the situation may lead to further instability and violence in the country.

At the same time, a group of OSCE states guided by the Russian Federation are continuing their efforts to challenge the way the OSCE/ODIHR is involved in the observation of elections in the region. Russia had put such strict conditions and limitations on a pending ODIHR mission that was supposed to monitor the presidential elections in Russia in March that the OSCE felt obliged to cancel its mission. These elections were mainly monitored by a group from the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly which observed serious shortcomings, in particular a lack of access to the public media by candidates other than the Putin-supported Medvedev and a heavy-handed approach by the authorities against opposition candidates.

All in all, it becomes abundantly clear that there is a great necessity to organize free and fair elections in all OSCE countries, but at the same time the OSCE’s main watchdog and assistance-provider (ODIHR) finds it increasingly difficult to implement its task. The ‘reform debate’ within the OSCE is far from over and the present developments do not indicate in any way that a political will exists to transform the OSCE into an effective organization which has the necessary tools to respond to challenges such as the ones described above. The reality is rather that a relatively small group of participating states consider the OSCE’s role