The OSCE and transnational security threats

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At its 2003 Maastricht Ministerial Council meeting, the OSCE, for the first time, adopted a major programmatic document dealing with transnational threats, the ‘OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century’. While the Strategy itself represents a major step into a hitherto unknown working field, it has never been strategically implemented, a weakness it shares with, among others, the ‘OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension’ adopted at the same Ministerial Council meeting.

The 2003 Maastricht Strategy

The CSCE/OSCE’s extremely high level of political flexibility is reflected by the fact that the Organization, in its comparatively brief period of existence, has dealt with three quite different types of conflicts. During the 1970s/1980s, the CSCE focused on the international East-West conflict trying to defuse and (partially) overcome it through dialogue, norm-setting and co-operation. In the 1990s, the OSCE refocused its activities primarily on the regulation of (ethno-)national conflicts trying to prevent, contain and manage them and to rehabilitate war-torn countries. More quickly than other international organizations, it developed suitable instruments, most importantly its field operations and the High Commissioner on National Minorities.

Although transnational threats were marginally touched upon in earlier OSCE documents, i.e. the 1999 Charter for European Security, the 2003 Maastricht Strategy is the first OSCE document to deal in depth with this new type of threat. The prime motivation for doing so was certainly the post-9/11 environment, where terrorism and related transnational threats were seen as the single most important threat to security. The Strategy’s two key programmatic sentences read as follows: ‘Threats to security and stability in the OSCE region are today more likely to arise as negative, destabilizing consequences of developments that cut across the politico-military, economic and environmental and human dimensions, than from any major armed conflict.’ And: ‘Furthermore, threats often do not arise from within a single state, but are transnational in character.’ (2003 Maastricht Strategy, paras 3 and 7). As

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3 OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, ibid.
factors that may cause transnational threats the document identifies, among others, ‘[w]eak governance, and a failure by States to secure adequate and functioning democratic institutions’, ‘systematic violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms’, ‘deepening economic disparities’, ‘[e]nvironmental degradation’, and ‘[d]emographic factors’ (ibid., paras 4 and 5). As is the case with many other key OSCE terms (e.g. ‘national minority’), the document does not define the term ‘transnational’ in any way. However, the use of this term (‘not within a single State’) and the cases of transnational threats dealt with in the Maastricht Strategy show that the term is used in a way which is consistent with a scholarly understanding thereof. In accordance with this understanding, a transnational relationship (whether conflictual or not) is one of a transboundary character that includes at least one non-state actor.

Although the Maastricht Strategy recognizes that ‘(t)hreats emerging from inter-State and intra-State conflicts remain the broadest category of threat’ (ibid., para. 9), it stops short of discussing the highly complicated relationship among international, national and transnational conflict constellations. While it is clear that these terms represent Weberian ideal types rather than concrete empirical findings, it is always tempting to simply declare the predominance or even exclusivity of a single, one-dimensional conflict constellation during a certain period. However, the reality is more complex: While the ethno-political conflicts in the 1990s were predominantly national in character, they almost always included an international dimension and, frequently overlooked, transnational aspects, i.e. war economies driven by guerilla groups or break-away regions based on smuggling, trafficking and blackmail ‘taxes’. In the same way, the most recent war in Georgia and the growing tensions between Russia and Western countries remind us of the fact that the ‘old’ inter-state conflicts in Europe have not simply been replaced by ‘new’ national and/or transnational ones. Rather, transnational threats and challenges have added a new dimension of conflict that is interlinked to other conflict dimensions in multiple ways. For example, while the causes of the conflict in Afghanistan are predominantly transnational, the political answers given are clearly international in character.

While these issues are not addressed in the document, the Maastricht Strategy clearly identifies the major types of transnational threats and outlines ways to address them. The document starts with terrorism, the specific danger of which is characterized by ‘its ability to use asymmetric methods to bypass traditional security and defence systems.’ (Ibid., para. 10). In this way, the document nicely paraphrases one key feature of transnational relations, namely the relative loss of power by state actors compared to non-state actors. Further on, the strategy mentions organized crime that ‘often runs parallel with terrorism, regarding both actors and methods’ (ibid., para. 11). Economic and environmental factors ‘can provide a breeding ground for other major threats’ (ibid., para. 14). A major achievement of the Maastricht Strategy lies in the fact that it does not simply refer to ‘hard’ factors such as terrorism or organized