New OSCE Chairman-in-office faces daunting task

Arie Bloed

As of the 1st of January 2009 Greece has taken over the chairmanship of the OSCE from outgoing chair Finland. This is hardly an enviable position in view of the increasing security problems in the Eurasian region as Greece was immediately confronted with a new crisis as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict about gas deliveries. When Russia cut gas deliveries to the Ukraine on the 1st of January, its Western neighbours in Central Europe and the Balkans were also hit. Gas deliveries to countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic also diminished, leading to strong demands from the Czech Republic (which took over the EU Presidency in January) and the EU Commission to resume full deliveries immediately. Within days the Russians completely closed the gas pipelines running through the Ukraine, leading to serious shortages in several EU countries. (At the time of this writing, the outcome of the conflict was still uncertain.)

Finland has had a difficult time as OSCE Chairman, faced in particular with the devastating Georgian-Russian war in August and its serious political fallout. One of the consequences is that the long-standing and rather successful OSCE Mission in Georgia has to close down in the first months of 2009 because the Russian Federation refused its consent to prolong its mandate in December of last year. Although the Finnish Foreign Minister, Alexander Stubb, has been a very active and skilful OSCE Chairman, it cannot be denied that 2008 showed serious further weakening of the overall importance of the organization, again demonstrated by the lack of consensus on a concluding document at the Helsinki Ministerial in December of last year.

Whether Greece will experience a smoother chairmanship is doubtful. The global economic crisis may lead to serious political problems within and between certain OSCE countries. The economic decline, particularly in Russia in the last months of 2008 is dramatic and several observers expect that this may lead to political instability. And there is no sign that Moscow intends to change its highly assertive, sometimes aggressive policy towards the OSCE and the Western

---

1 Arie Bloed is Editor-in-Chief of Security and Human Rights.
countries which may undermine what has been left of the OSCE’s effectiveness. Moreover, Greece starts its chairmanship with serious political problems in its own country, where massive demonstrations against the sitting government have almost paralyzed the country. The domestic political problems in Greece may have a negative impact on its OSCE chairmanship.

2. Helsinki Ministerial Council meeting again fails to adopt political declaration

‘The spirit of Helsinki has revitalized the OSCE, and the meeting of foreign ministers gave new impetus to discussions on European security challenges’, said the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, at the close of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Helsinki on 5 December last year. This was nice diplomatic jargon aimed at upholding the image of at least some progress. In reality, very little progress has been made on virtually all major problems in the OSCE area, also reflected in the fact that the Council again failed to adopt a final political declaration due to a lack of consensus. One of the main successes of the Council meeting was that this time a record 50 foreign ministers attended the meeting, whereas in the past only a very limited number showed up, instead sending less high-ranking officials. This ‘success’, however, demonstrates the fact that there are very serious political problems on the table. Still, no substantial progress could be achieved.

One of the main issues, strongly promoted by Moscow, was a draft decision to convene an OSCE Summit meeting in 2009 in order to discuss the Eurasian ‘security architecture’. This was met with strong opposition from many Western countries which don’t see any reason for a summit meeting on that topic. The outcome, therefore, was that Greece, as new Chairman-in-Office, may convene some kind of high-level meeting this year in order to discuss the issue further.

The Ministerial adopted a total of thirteen more specific decisions with rather limited practical significance, including a statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They welcomed the ‘constructive and positive momentum in the peace process for the political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict’, and encouraged the sides to intensify negotiations. The foreign ministers also agreed to enhance OSCE efforts to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti, and to combat trafficking in human beings. Other decisions concerned, among other issues, small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, as well as countering terrorism. The Greek chairmanship was also tasked to continue working on a legal framework for the, thus far, strictly political OSCE. In spite of its disappointing outcome, the Council meeting provided ample opportunity to express strong political opinions about the major problems in the OSCE area and, therefore, served as a barometer of the poor political weather within the organization.