Cooperative Security — principle and reality

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The first decade of the 21st century was largely lost with regards to Cooperative Security policy (not only) in Europe. As the then OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, the Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis, put it in her opening remarks at the Corfu Ministerial Council meeting in June 2009: ‘Over the last ten years, European security policy has been increasingly dominated by unilateral and frequently confrontational approaches. This is a far cry from the principle of cooperative security, to which the OSCE States committed themselves in the 1990 Charter of Paris’. This was particularly true for US foreign policy during the two terms of the Bush administration, but has also increasingly been the case for Russia’s foreign policy behaviour since 2000, when Vladimir Putin became President. As a result, Russia and the West are in dispute over nearly every major European security policy item. The fact that European security questions have lost relevance compared to security problems outside of Europe, has not improved this situation, but has added an element of unproductive neglect.

Against this background, it might be worthwhile to reconsider the principle of Cooperative Security, to analyze the relationship between this principle and its implementation, and the different causes and consequences non-implementation may have in various problem areas, as well as to draw some conclusions for the current security dialogue within the OSCE — the Corfu process.

The normative starting point of the concept of Cooperative Security, enshrined in every major OSCE document, is that ‘each participating State has an equal right to security’. That corresponds to the understanding ‘that security is indivisible and that the security of each (…) is inseparably linked to the security of all (…)’. Consequently, States have pledged that ‘they will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States’. These norms aim at ruling out different levels of security in different parts of the OSCE area. Together, this was and still is a revolutionary approach, because it breaks with the ages-old and still widely practised principle that one can only gain what somebody else has lost. The need to overcome this zero-sum logic has an objective basis, which is formulated in the ‘Charter for European Security’ as follows: ‘The risks and challenges we face today cannot be met by a single State or organization’. (Para. 12). This means that the network of mutual interdependence has become strong enough that even major powers cannot act alone on a growing number of

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questions. This is even more evident today than it was in 1999, when we think about problems such as the financial crisis, climate change and the corresponding need for a new energy system — all of them challenges that can only be addressed on the basis of cooperative policies.

However, there is no simple way to translate the principle of Cooperative Security into political reality. Some states are more exposed to certain conflicts, risks and threats than others and consequently they might be more engaged and in a different manner. Another reason for these differences is that states are at different levels of their general political development and thus have different perceptions of key principles such as stability or democracy. And of course, there are also deliberate political attempts to make extra gains at the cost of the security of others by using unilateral or even confrontational approaches. In the following we will look at some specific problem areas inquiring into the specific causes of non-implementation of the principle of Cooperative Security.

A first category of problems involves intra-state conflicts, which are frequently, but not always, of an ethno-political nature. Each and every violent conflict, as well as its broader consequences, represents a case of different levels of security. Within the conflict area, people suffer. States outside the conflict area are affected to various degrees and with different intensities. Neighbouring states, for example, have to receive refugees, others do not. States look with particular interest at minorities of their own ethnic kin living in other states with a view to protecting them and may, thus, easily become involved in a conflict. All in all, states are involved to different degrees and consequently have different interests and follow different strategies of conflict management. In such situations, it is particularly tempting to overstress one’s own narrow interests and to seek extra gains at the cost of equal and common security of all states. Of course, this kind of unilateral approach only exacerbates already existing different levels of security. To avoid such unilateral approaches, the High Commissioner on National Minorities has published the ‘Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations’ that contain norms for state behaviour related to one’s ethnic kin. Unfortunately, these and other sets of HCNM’s recommendations are not even politically binding.

A special situation arises when certain entities are not recognized as states by all participating States. Kosovo, which is recognized by many but not by all states, is a case in point. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the independence of which is only recognized by one participating State each and not by the other 55, are even more pronounced cases. With unrecognized territories, the problem of different levels of security has become particularly obvious: These entities have no membership in international organizations. Consequently, they have not taken on international commitments and obligations as normal states do. And this leads to a situation in which the populations of these entities as well as these entities themselves are much less protected under international law than recognized states. Thus, we can say that unrecognized quasi-states represent one of the most difficult cases of different levels of security.