Book Review

Christian Nünlist and David Svarin (eds.),

In 2014 Europe's security configuration had to deal with a severe crisis. Events in Ukraine led to a situation of civil war in Ukraine and a further development of the East-West Divide between (Western) Europe and Russia. During 2014 most attention was given to international actors like the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and state actors like the United States (US) and the Russian Federation, whose actions were either ineffective in resolving the conflict or further antagonised the situation. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), however, fulfilled an important role in the background and tried, with some success, to offer a forum for mediation and impartial fact gathering.

The active role which the OSCE took upon itself in 2014 comes at an interesting point in the organisation's history: the organisation's relevance was doubted by some and it was struggling to find new common ground between its member states in the run-up to its 40th anniversary in 2015 (Helsinki+40, after the original Helsinki process). The OSCE's relevance had declined due to the expansion of NATO and the EU (both in terms of their membership and their role within the European security system), but also because a number of post-Soviet states, Russia first and foremost, valued their sovereignty above the other pillar of the Helsinki process, human rights. Those human rights were more valued by Western participants in the OSCE, leading to growing scepticism in post-Soviet states about the OSCE. Moreover, there are a number of unresolved conflicts among OSCE member states.

The fact that precisely the OSCE acted as the main moderator during the Ukrainian crisis thus provokes some questions about the conditions leading to this development, as well as questions pertaining to the role of the Swiss
Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2014. These questions are brought forward and analysed in the report Overcoming the East-West Divide: Perspectives on the Role of the OSCE in the Ukraine Crisis published by the Centre for Security Studies at the ETH Zurich and Foraus – Swiss Forum on Foreign Policy. Not counting the preface by the OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier, three contributions to the report try to further analyse the role of the OSCE in the Ukrainian crisis, while the editors Christian Nünlist and Pál Dunay provide the reader with a to the point introduction and a summary of the conclusions drawn in the contributions.

The first contribution by Thomas Greminger, the permanent representative of Switzerland at the OSCE, the UN and international organisations in Vienna, argues that the Ukraine crisis was both a curse and an opportunity for the OSCE. The crisis might be considered a curse because during the conflict the principles of the Helsinki Final Act have been broken by Russia, but also because of the growing distrust between East and West and because the crisis diverted attention from other important issues concerning the OSCE. It was however also an opportunity because it allowed the Swiss chairman to revive the OSCE as an important actor within the European security constellation, by using the OSCE as both a platform for political dialogue and operational crisis management. This was made possible by the fact that the crisis reactivated the OSCE’s ability to take decisions by consensus. While the reasons for the revival of the OSCE are clearly put forward by the author, he however fails to explain how the ability to make consensus decisions returned; also the precise role of the Swiss chairmanship could be further expounded.

The second contribution by Christian Nünlist addresses the problem of the growing East-West divide between Russia and the West and its interactions with the Helsinki process and the OSCE and places it within a historical context. Having provided the reader with a historical overview Nünlist continues to analyse the positions of several participants in the OSCE, whose reactions to the crisis have been very different. He concludes that the crisis has brought the threat perceptions of Western countries closer together and that Russia’s attempts to divide the West have not succeeded, and that therefore the West’s main challenge is to keep together. He also concludes that the OSCE has been put back into the spotlight, offering many useful services to the international political processes. For the OSCE, however, this renewed attention only holds true for the short term; Nünlist argues that in the long run it will have to decide what its raison d’être is: is this to promote security through Western values like democracy, the rule of law and human rights or through an inclusive concept of security, like the one used by the OSCE during the Cold War. If the OSCE opts for the former, it will most likely lead to Russia blocking the OSCE, while the