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OSCE: Reform, Form or Format?

In December 1997, the Copenhagen Ministerial decided to initiate a review of the operational capacities of the Secretariat. This exercise, very precise and limited in scope, soon became known as "the Secretariat reform" or simply "the OSCE reform". These different denominations were the source of many misunderstandings during the work that led to the final report on the issue.

Those misunderstandings could have been avoided. How could one possibly think of reforming an international organization only four years after its creation? A certain loss of shape and form, or of purpose, a certain amount of degeneration, seems required to justify the term "reform". And in the mid-1990s the OSCE was expanding fast in all fields - generating rather than degenerating.

Behind this "reform" misunderstanding lies of course the main question of the initial form or format of the organization, its shape, structure, purpose, aims, policies, and strategies. The OSCE was born out of a consensus to transform the CSCE into an international organization. But this consensus was not precise enough to convey a strict institutional orientation.

Thus the OSCE came into being as a "*toile de fond*" on which participating States were able to project their respective ideas of what the Organization could do. Its structure was loose enough to permit everyone to maintain diverging ideas on purpose, means, methods, policies etc. It was so flexible that it even permitted a carryover of the CSCE conference culture, more linked with declaratory activities than OSCE-specific field and mission deployment. Even today the OSCE represents this kind of aggregate corporate culture where CSCE fossils are taken care of within the same agenda that handles the day-to-day administration of the mission work; where different tendencies - political, regional but also cultural and historical - are engaged in a daily confrontation.

Some would limit the Organization to being a telescopic device for their national institutions, permitting them to act nearly directly in the field, but through international mechanisms. Others regret that the Organization discontinued its pan-European security role - as a decision-making partner in cooperation with the UN Security Council - most recently played during Albania's economic implosion in 1997. They favour the development of a much stronger institutional and Secretariat structure and the establishment - formally or informally - of a group of leading states to play the role of a security directorate or council. Others again have not made up their minds exactly how much they want the OSCE to do, and how much they want to handle through other organizations. These participating States represent the largest

group within the Organization, thereby creating a certain stable disorientation or unstable equilibrium.

This disorientation and instability was always reflected - and certainly not compensated for - by the Secretariat. The OSCE Secretariat expanded during recent years to cope with ever larger field missions. But it remains small, if measured against the needs of a fairly large network of missions. It is not strong, neither in terms of manpower, nor in terms of formal competence or authority. So when it comes to institutional memory, to following through on a given policy line or to ensuring some degree of continuity from one Chairmanship to the next, the Secretariat certainly had - and still has - inadequate means.

In this situation, permanent and structural to the OSCE, it was clear that any review of the Secretariat's functions could immediately restart the usual conflicts of interest concerning the role of the Organization, its institutions, policies and behaviour, some of which are delineated above.

This assumption proved correct, down to the very details of the review.

The object of the review, the spring 1998 version of the OSCE Secretariat, was a strange creature. Its basis was the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), established by the Charter of Paris. But the CPC has not prevented any conflicts. That ambition had long ago been transferred to the OSCE field missions which combined this task with crisis handling and post-conflict work. The main function of the CPC was a mission-caretaker role ("give me the money, the people, the cars ..."). In the Secretariat there was no division of labour, neither in principle nor in practice, between the "designers" and the "mechanics". At the same time the Secretariat featured sections called "augmentations" of the major field missions. Partly as a result of primitive financing methods (only voluntary contributions for large missions) and restrictions by donors it was only possible to reinforce the Vienna Secretariat indirectly by allocating part of mission financing to headquarters.

The Copenhagen Ministerial changed this situation by adopting a compulsory financing scheme for larger missions. The beginning of 1998 was thus an adequate moment to consider a restructuring of the Secretariat in the light of the newly assessed scale of contributions.

An intricate structure, with no clear division of labour, was also an obstacle for budget preparation and financial control. Budget outlines were approximate and easily attracted legitimate criticism by delegations.

The lack of a clearly defined organizational chart also meant deficiencies in administrative performance as there was no operational monopoly nor centralization for decision-making on matters relating to mission planning, staffing and steering.

The unstable personnel situation represented another serious problem. Unlike other international organizations the OSCE relies only partly on contracted personnel. A very significant part of the personnel was - and still is - supplied to the Organization by participating States through the secondment system.

And even for the core personnel, the contract periods were short compared to those of other international organizations. That was not enough to ensure continuity, a sense of solidarity, loyalty and purpose for the collaborators - and it was certainly too short to establish strong teamwork.

There were also other questions to be dealt with such as the development of stronger mission liaison and support functions, the need for broadening the interface and operational cohesion between the Chairman-in-Office and the Secretariat as well as for unifying Secretariat work in the field and co-ordination with other international organizations.

After initial discussion with the delegations, I brought in consultants on administrative organization.

Their advice was prompt and clear: Get rid of the aggregate, sedimented sections of the Secretariat with their intricate communication channels and confusion. Replace them with a functionally defined pillar structure where architecture and engineering would be strictly separated from infrastructure, administrative, technical, budgetary and personnel functions. The proposal for such a structure met with resistance, especially in the CPC where the previous decision-makers wanted to retain control, not only on mission policy issues, but also on secondment choices to sustain those policies, right down to very technical issues concerning the missions. Another type of resistance originated from those whose ranking or role within the Secretariat would be modified through such a structural change.

As this functional separation was a main target of the exercise, I nevertheless decided to maintain the proposal for such a structure.

A general remark: There is a tendency to go on copying the fragmented institutional structure of the OSCE (ODIHR, HCNM, Prague Office, Parliamentary Assembly, etc.), even within the framework of the Vienna Secretariat itself. This tendency represents a threat to the cohesion of the Secretariat's work and new initiatives should take that risk into account. Keeping this structure "clean" is not only a matter for a structural review. It should be a matter of constant attention for the delegations.

The second largest task of the review was the proposed extension of the contract periods. A number of participating States were very much against changes that would reduce the flexibility of the Organization and make it impossible to "hire and fire" at short notice. My aim in proposing the new formula was to keep the OSCE more flexible than other international organizations, and maintain the idea of a "non-lifetime career job", but at the same time to foster a sense of common purpose and team cohesion. Very often the culmination of a mission would occur after three to four years and to ensure continuity, the length of headquarters contracts should not be any shorter, rather somewhat longer. On this point I did not see room for compromise. The contract period extension was necessary, and the solution (five to seven years maximum) which has been applied since then serves a good purpose.

On the other questions it proved impossible to strike a deal. The attempt to give the Secretariat more personnel was opposed by several delegations.

Undoubtedly these questions could have been taken much further in a different situation. Being in favour of reinforcing the Secretariat with respect to personnel, and not close to getting there, I even considered the possibility of not issuing a report at all: The proposal for a new structure and the extension of contract periods seemed too minimal to justify a formal conclusion. But the Ministerial decision was clear. The review had to be finished by September 1998.

A few weeks later the Milošević move on Kosovo and the subsequent negotiations by Ambassador Holbrooke - leading to the deployment of the Kosovo Verification Mission - created a major opportunity for streamlining the operational instruments of the OSCE and perhaps going beyond the ambitions of the report, also with respect to personnel, and to headquarters. What could not be decided on sheer principle would have been easier to achieve with reference to a concrete situation and to specific necessities. But at that point the review had already been finalized and published.

Judging from the results, I do not regret, however, that the report was closely focused on only a few issues of the "reform agenda". While selection of personnel is still a problem, the Secretariat has strongly improved its performance, especially on budgeting and financing issues. Continuity at headquarters has been significantly improved through the prolongation of the contract period.

Independent of these concrete results, the review represented an opportunity for a larger debate on the role and tasks of the Organization - on its form and format; a type of debate that is never undertaken in the Permanent Council, nor in any other body of the Organization.