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The Group of Like-Minded Countries within the OSCE¹

“I am proud to represent in the OSCE world one of the Like-minded countries. It is certainly not a threatening block but a loose club which, besides the national interests, equally wants to further the OSCE itself, because we believe in it.” With these well-chosen words, the former Swiss Ambassador to the OSCE, Dr Heinrich Reimann, characterized the Like-Minded Countries during his farewell speech in 2004.

Although the Group of Like-Minded Countries has been around in the OSCE for many years, there are often questions asked about why these five countries have come together, whether they pursue any sort of overall policy and whom they are working with. We therefore thought it would be useful to analyse and explain how and why this group of countries came into being, how they work together, how they are perceived by the other participating States, and what role they play in the OSCE.

What Makes the Like-Minded Countries “Like-Minded”?

The concept of “like-minded countries” is well established within the framework of the United Nations and has traditionally been used by a group of countries within the UN that has taken a particularly positive approach to development co-operation issues. In the OSCE, the origin of the Group of Like-Minded Countries dates back to the mid-1990s. The Like-Minded Countries strongly believe in the relevance and the added value of the OSCE and in its potential and therefore push for a strengthening of the Organization in terms of functions and structures. The common ownership of the Organization by all participating States and their equal status, self-determination, and non-discrimination are of particular concern to the Like-Minded Countries. Their aim is a well-managed, well-resourced, and dynamic Organization with transparent processes, geared towards consensus building in decision making. The group now comprises Canada, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

The Like-Minded Countries have no common borders, nor do they share the same geography or the same history. They do not speak the same language and they do not all belong to the same international or regional security and economic arrangements.

Still, the Like-Minded Countries comprise a fairly homogeneous group: The five countries are well-established and independent Western democra-

¹ The opinions expressed in this contribution are entirely those of the authors.

cies. They share the same values and they often work closely together in other organizations, in particular within the United Nations. They all attach the utmost importance to multilateral co-operation. They have a general record as consensus builders, as problem solvers, peace facilitators and peace brokers. As countries that can be counted upon to have a positive attitude towards international co-operation and to follow up their multilateral participation with their fair share of the necessary financial means they are also seen as valuable partners. The Like-Minded Countries also have an advantage in that most of them represent smaller nations: They are often viewed as not pursuing a self-serving national agenda. And even if they do not all always form the "inner circle", they are well anchored in North Atlantic and European structures and therefore economically and politically well integrated.

Another important element that these countries have in common is a considerable overlap of interests in their foreign policies. All five countries enjoy peaceful relations with their powerful neighbours (USA, Russian Federation, EU). In all of them, there is a strong tradition of upholding independence and national sovereignty. Thus, international law, the rule of law, and global solidarity play an important role in their pursuit of international politics. The same applies to promoting and protecting human rights obligations and the rights of national minorities. Four of the five countries participate in the Human Security Network. All four EFTA members belong to the Group of Like-Minded Countries.

These common foreign policy parameters are reflected in the stance taken by the Like-Minded Countries within the OSCE:

In all three dimensions, the Like-Minded Countries do their utmost to implement OSCE commitments. They strongly advocate the importance of all three dimensions of the OSCE and the necessity of recognizing the cross-dimensionality of OSCE commitments and issues. In the economic and environmental dimension, the Like-Minded Countries have been open-minded about proposals for new initiatives. In the human dimension, they have taken a principled and independent approach to the issues.

The Like-Minded Countries are amongst the largest per capita contributors to the OSCE and its voluntary funds, including extra budgetary contributions. It was due to Norway and Switzerland that a breakthrough was achieved in the 2001 negotiations within the OSCE on the revised standard scale of contributions. After lengthy discussions and in order to avoid an impasse for the Organization, both countries increased their contributions to allow other countries to decrease theirs.

These features of the Like-Minded Countries have allowed them to play an independent and distinct role in the OSCE.

The Role of the Group of Like-Minded Countries in the OSCE

Undoubtedly, the Like-Minded Countries have gained more influence in the OSCE over the last few years as they have proved themselves useful in the work of the Organization and as their range of consultations has increased. This is also partly due to the need for additional contributions to the work and the functioning of the Organization, in view of the strong role of the United States, the Russian Federation, and the enlarged European Union. In light of the increasing difficulties experienced within the Organization, Like-Minded Countries have been actively involved in considering how best to strengthen the OSCE and to address the new risks and challenges of the twenty-first century. Combined, these elements have had a considerable influence on the co-operation and deliberations within the OSCE and on the formation of various interest-based groups in the OSCE.

The Like-Minded Countries have traditionally taken an active part in the work of the OSCE, including supporting the Chairmanship. All five countries have made themselves available to the Organization and chaired Working Groups. Two Like-Minded Countries, Switzerland and Norway, have also chaired the OSCE. Like-Minded Countries were called upon to serve as “wise persons”, in order to ease nomination processes for important positions in the Organization. Further, the Like-Minded Countries helped to bring specific negotiations to fruition: In 2004 the group was asked by the Bulgarian Chairmanship to produce a draft for a Ministerial decision on the establishment of a Panel of Eminent Persons on strengthening the effectiveness of the OSCE. The former Norwegian OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Knut Vollebæk, was asked to chair the Panel. In the past, Canada has chaired the Working Group on Improving the Functioning and Effectiveness of OSCE Field Operations; Iceland, the Informal Open-ended Group of Friends of the Chair on the Implementation of OSCE Commitments and Activities on Combating Terrorism; Liechtenstein, the Gender Working Group; Norway, the Working Group on Gender Equalities and Anti-Trafficking; and Switzerland, the Working Group on Tolerance.

The basis for this positive approach by the Like-Minded Countries is that they are open to listening to other countries’ concerns and ideas, and to discussing new solutions. They realize that the success of the OSCE so far has largely been due to the effective way in which the Organization has adapted to political change by readjusting at both structural and functional levels. This is how the Organization dealt with new developments through new commitments and instruments to meet the most burning challenges of the early 1990s. They are of the firm opinion that if the Organization wants to be an important international player in the future, it has to adapt in the same way to new threats and challenges.

Furthermore, the Like-Minded Countries are also sensitive to the fact that the 55 participating States draw upon different histories, cultures, and

traditions, and display different levels of stability and security. They therefore have different concerns and interests, which have to be taken into account if results are to be achieved together. This is why the Like-Minded Countries have been active in the discussions on OSCE reform. They share the view that there is a need for a strengthened political dialogue among equals in the Organization, as well as a need for political will by participating States to make use of this Organization, and for a principled approach to the implementation of OSCE commitments. They are open towards giving the OSCE a stronger role in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions.

The Like-Minded Countries often advocate listening to the genuine concerns of the participating States “East of Vienna”. The independence of the Like-Minded Countries and the general trust placed in them have at times allowed them to trigger a process of reflection. Their view – that the way in which a message is delivered will be instrumental in determining the dedication with which it is followed up – seems to have found some fertile soil within the OSCE.

Clearly, the Like-Minded Countries cannot bring about change in the OSCE on their own. But they have been open to understanding the various concerns, thereby bridging positions, engaging in dialogue, and bringing in new ideas with the aim of finding consensus solutions.

Experience shows that the Like-Minded Countries are requested to play a more prominent role in the OSCE when a commonly shared interest of the Organization is at stake. When it comes to national interests of the big players however, the Like-Minded Countries have little impact. One example is the lack of success candidates from the Like-Minded Countries generally have when it comes to filling top OSCE positions. With a numerically overwhelmingly strong European Union in the OSCE, the chances are reduced that candidates from Like-Minded Countries will fill such positions. That is also why the Like-Minded Countries have called for more transparency in the process of selecting candidates for top positions, especially Heads of Mission.

The Like-Minded Countries: The Why and the Who

While it is hard to say exactly when the concept of Like-Minded Countries was established in the OSCE, the first meetings of the group date back to the second half of the 1990s. It started off with sporadic meetings between countries with similar views on many issues being discussed in the OSCE. The origins of the Like-Minded Countries seem to be linked to two phenomena: the transformation of the CSCE to the OSCE and the enlargement of the European Union. Both these processes took place in 1995.

The “operationalization” of the OSCE, the implementation of the Dayton Accords, the growing role of the Organization in the Balkans, and the in-

terests of the European Union in the region created a need for closer co-ordination between countries interested in contributing to the then major new tasks of what had become the OSCE. By enhancing its profile in foreign and security policy and through the enlargement process, the European Union was interested in co-ordinating and exchanging views with associated countries and with countries sharing the same interests within the OSCE. The Like-Minded Countries in turn saw a political and operational benefit in these exchanges of views with the European Union.

The states making up the Group of Like-Minded Countries have changed over the years in response to political developments. While the group started off with Canada, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey in the mid 1990s, Liechtenstein joined in 1999 and Iceland in 2000. Turkey left the group in 2000, after being accepted as a candidate for membership of the European Union and hence starting to benefit from the regular exchange of views that the European Union accords to candidates.

Although the Group of Like-Minded Countries currently has only five members, it is interesting to note that the concept of "like mindedness" has gained a broader geographical application, as other OSCE participating States, even when they belong to other more formal groups, have characterized themselves as "like-minded" on certain issues.

How Does the Like-Minded Group Work?

The Like-Minded Countries form an informal group, having no chairmanship and no regular internal meetings. The group provides its members with a framework that is useful for the exchange of ideas and information and for comparing positions on issues under discussion in the OSCE. The deliberations among the Like-Minded Countries mostly take place on the margins of OSCE meetings and during consultations with other groups or countries in the OSCE. As a result, the five countries may adjust their respective positions in order to have more impact on a certain issue or with a view to resolving a problem. But, at the same time, on issues of specific national interest, they may also take quite different views, as has been the case when discussing the scale of contributions. Similarly, on issues where they find themselves on the same side, they may easily enlist one another's support. The Like-Minded Countries do not speak with one voice and do not take common positions. But in practice, because they are like-minded, they often take harmonious positions. Sometimes all five of them (or less than five) make common statements in the Permanent Council.

Whether meeting among themselves or consulting with other states and groups of states, the Like-Minded Countries are generally represented at ambassadorial level. In recent years, the Like-Minded Countries have increas-

ingly taken on the role of interlocutor in meetings with other states and groups of states.

While meetings between the Like-Minded Countries and other states and group of states were initially held sporadically (principally with the European Union), they now take place on a weekly basis with the European Union, the OSCE Chairmanship (since 2002), and the Russian Federation (since 2003). Other meetings occur on an “as needed” basis.

As it is an informal structure, it is also very much up to the ambassadors themselves how much they want to make of this group. Interest in and dedication to the Organization as well as personal relationships among the five ambassadors will therefore play a role both internally within the group and in whatever function the group as such can fulfil in deliberations with its partners.

For the Like-Minded Countries, these meetings have not only contributed to an increased flow of information, but have also enabled them to play the role of a sounding board for their interlocutors, to give advice, and, in some instances, to act as a bridge builder between different positions.

With the OSCE’s focus now turning towards Central Asia and the specific security challenges of the countries in this region, three of the Like-Minded Countries have also initiated *ad hoc* meetings with the five Central Asian states. These consultations have always been extremely useful for the Group in gaining a better understanding of the interests and preoccupations of these countries and the challenges as they see them – which do not necessarily correspond with the perception of these challenges from a more Western European/North American perspective – as well as the views of these countries on OSCE issues and working methods. These contacts also aim at encouraging the Central Asian countries to intensify their involvement with the Organization’s discussions – bearing in mind that the delegations of these countries have a number of dossiers other than the OSCE to deal with. On the issue of regional statements at OSCE Ministerial meetings, the Like-Minded Countries came out in 2003 in support of the countries of Central Asia and the Western Balkans, which had resisted the continuation of such statements. The requirement for regional statements for these countries was subsequently dropped.

Conclusion

As the overall aims of the OSCE correspond to the foreign policy goals of the Like-Minded Countries, the Organization allows these countries to implement elements of their foreign policies. Moreover, the OSCE enables the Like-Minded Countries to interact with a great number of states from the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region and in a great variety of areas in a way that no other regional organization can manage. In particular, it allows them

to test new forms of co-operation with other OSCE participating States. The manifold networking opportunities provided in the OSCE are of particular value to countries with relatively small diplomatic services.

It can be argued that the Group of Like-Minded Countries is an asset for the OSCE and constitutes a useful instrument in the efforts to enhance the atmosphere of understanding and trust between participating States in this Organization. OSCE participating States, particularly the big players, may find increasingly that the Group of Like-Minded Countries can play a useful role in helping the OSCE states to move forward together.