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# Early Warning and Early Action – Current Developments in OSCE Conflict Prevention Activities

In Ministerial Council (MC) Decision No. 3/11 on Elements of the Conflict Cycle,[1] adopted on 7 December 2011 at the OSCE Vilnius Ministerial Council Meeting, the OSCE participating States decided to "strengthen OSCE capabilities in early warning, early action, dialogue facilitation, mediation support and post-conflict rehabilitation on an operational level".[2] Based on this decision, the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) has engaged in a range of activities, in co-ordination with other OSCE executive structures,[3] to implement the decision and to develop and strengthen further the OSCE toolbox for early warning and early action. In 2012 and the first half of 2013, this work concentrated on three areas:

(1)  Developing a systematic early warning capacity,
(2)  Developing and adjusting OSCE tools for swift crisis response, and
(3)  Building up a systematic mediation-support capacity.

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Note: This article is based on work carried out by the Operations Service of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC/OS) on the implementation of MC.DEC/3.11. The author would therefore like to acknowledge the contribution by the entire CPC/OS team to this chapter. Nonetheless, the views contained herein are the author's own.

1   Decision No. 3/11, Elements of the Conflict Cycle, Related to Enhancing the OSCE's Capabilities in Early Warning, Early Action, Dialogue Facilitation and Mediation Support, and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, MC.DEC/3/11 of 7 December 2011, in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Eighteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council, 6 and 7 December 2011*, Vilnius, 7 December 2011, pp. 11-16. (in the following cited as MC Decision No. 3/11).

2   Ibid., para. 1. For a review of the process that led to the decision and the initial steps taken towards its implementation, see: Alice Ackermann/Herbert Salber, The OSCE "Corfu Process" – A Preliminary View of the Security Dialogue on Early Warning, Conflict Prevention and Resolution, Crisis Management, and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2010*, Baden-Baden 2011, pp. 197-202, and Alice Ackermann, Strengthening OSCE Responses to Crises and Conflicts: An Overview, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2012*, Baden-Baden 2013, pp. 205-211.

3   The OSCE executive structures comprise the Secretariat, institutions, field operations, and special representatives or other operational instruments of the Organization. Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Rules of Procedure of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe*, MC.DOC/1/06, 1 November 2006, Part II, Section (A), para. 13.

*Early Warning*

The ability to provide timely early warning is an important, though by no means sufficient condition for effective conflict prevention. Accordingly, early warning has been an integral component of OSCE conflict prevention work since the early 1990s. The 1992 Helsinki Document gave the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) the mandate to "provide 'early warning' and, as appropriate, 'early action' at the earliest possible stage in regard to tensions involving national minority issues".[4] OSCE field operations have long served as the "eyes and ears" of the OSCE with regard to potential crises. However, the OSCE had not developed a systematic approach to early warning and, the special role of the HCNM with regard to national minorities apart, early warning was formally a matter for the Permanent Council (PC) and the Chairperson-in-Office (CiO).[5] To that extent, MC Decision No. 3/11 broke new ground in two respects:

(1)  It provided the Secretary General (SG) with a clear and explicit mandate to provide, in consultation with the Chairmanship, "early warning to the participating States by bringing to the attention of the Permanent Council any situation of emerging tensions or conflicts in the OSCE area" and to "suggest to the Permanent Council, after consulting the participating State(s) concerned, possible options for timely and effective response(s) to escalating tensions or conflicts in the OSCE area".[6]

(2)  It also called for the SG to "consolidate, in co-ordination with other executive structures, the OSCE's early warning capacity in a more methodical, comprehensive and cross-dimensional manner"[7] and to ensure that the CPC "assumes the role and functions as the focal point for the Organization-wide systematic collection, collation, analysis and assessment of relevant early warning signals from various sources, co-operating and co-ordinating closely with other OSCE executive structures and the Parliamentary Assembly".[8]

Hence, while fully recognizing the special mandate of the HCNM and emphasizing the need for close consultation with other executive structures, MC Decision No. 3/11 elevated the role of the Secretary General and the CPC with regard to early warning.

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4  CSCE Helsinki Document 1992: The Challenges of Change, Helsinki, 10 July 1992, Helsinki Decisions, Chapter II, para. 3, in: Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 701-777, here: p. 716.
5  Cf. ibid., Chapter III.
6  MC Decision No. 3/11, cited above (Note 1), para. 4.
7  Ibid.
8  Ibid., para. 2.

In the run-up to the 2011 Vilnius Ministerial Council Meeting, the CPC had already led an internal working group that brought together colleagues from the CPC, the Office of the HCNM, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Office of the Co-ordinator for Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), and selected field operations to develop internal guidelines for early warning. This work was finalized in early 2012. The *Early Warning: OSCE Internal Guidelines*[9] aim to consolidate and further systematize the current practice of early warning within the Organization. The guidelines lay out an early warning methodology and provide a structure for information sharing and reporting.

Based on MC Decision No. 3/11 and the Internal Early Warning Guidelines, the CPC:

(a)  co-ordinated the establishment of a network of Early Warning Focal Points from all OSCE field operations, ODIHR, the HCNM, and relevant units of the Secretariat;

(b)  organized annual meetings of Early Warning Focal Points, fostering exchange of knowledge and best practices related to early warning methodologies;

(c)  developed a generic template to streamline and systematize internal reporting on developments that might lead to a situation requiring early warning, including proposals for OSCE response options;

(d)  developed a mechanism to follow-up on proposed response options;

(e)  developed an internal generic list of indicators to serve as an aide-memoire to guide the OSCE early warning process;

(f)  carried out a comprehensive mapping of conflict settings in the OSCE area;

(g)  developed an internal step-by-step guide on how to conduct conflict analysis;

(h)  established follow-up mechanisms to be used to monitor whether and how proposed response options have been implemented;

(i)  reached out to other international organizations and think tanks to share experience on early warning methodologies.

The intensive work done in developing a framework for a methodological and systematic approach to early warning and the inclusion of a wide network of OSCE staff in these efforts helped to raise awareness with regard to early warning throughout the Organization. As a result, analysis and reporting on emerging tensions and conflicts have become more frequent, more systematic, and more forward-looking and now include a strong emphasize on identifying potential response options. Based on analysis and assessments provided by the CPC, the Secretary General has, up to July 2013, raised his

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9    The document was distributed to delegations for their information with the code SEC.GAL/52/12.

concerns to the participating States in the PC on eleven occasions with regard to worrying developments in the OSCE area. The term "early warning", however, was only used on one occasion – at the PC on 13 December 2012 with regard to the situation around the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process, and the pardoning of Ramil Safarov and the potential opening of the airport in Nagorno-Karabakh, in particular.

Early warning-related analysis and especially early warning communication need to be carefully balanced. On the one hand, it is important to avoid "crying wolf", i.e. issuing early warnings so often that it becomes difficult to recognize situations when violent conflict is actually imminent. It is also essential that quiet-diplomacy efforts are not prejudiced. Yet on the other hand it is important not to be caught off guard with tensions escalating and no early warning issued in time. To address this dilemma, the term "early warning" has been reserved in the OSCE context for situations where the outbreak of large scale violence is considered likely, while tensions that need to be addressed in an "early prevention" mode are reported without using this particular term. Whether or not the term early warning is used, the conflict analysis conducted forms the basis for developing targeted response options that can be implemented within existing mandates, such as projects addressing root causes, high-level visits, or statements.

*Early Action*

Early warning is of little value for conflict prevention if it is not followed up by appropriate, timely early action. Early action requires a prompt decision to act quickly translated into action on the ground. Overcoming the so-called early warning response gap is one of the key challenges for all conflict prevention actors, and especially for international and regional organizations such as the OSCE, where the divergent views and differing interests of participating States need to be reconciled to allow the Organization to act.

A solid analysis of the structural causes and trigger factors of an emerging crisis, identifying targeted and workable response options is a good starting point for early action, as it can not only alert decision makers of the need to take action, but can also guide them on the best action to take. Hence a well-established early warning system is a key point of departure. A flexible and well equipped tool box for crisis response is another prerequisite for early action – an operational system that allows responses to be carried out quickly is a third one. The crucial link between early warning and early action, however, remains the political will to make the decision to act. While the OSCE Secretariat and the executive structures can further improve both their toolsets and the operational procedures for using them, the political will and courage of the respective Chairmanship and participating States to enable quick and decisive early action remain paramount.

The Chairmanship and executive structures have a wide range of early action tools available within their existing mandates, including the possibility to dispatch Special Representatives or fact-finding/expert teams without seeking formal approval by the PC. In this regard, MC Decision No. 3/11 states that the Ministerial Council "expects the OSCE Chairmanship and the executive structures to take full advantage of their respective mandates to address all phases of the conflict cycle and urges the Chairmanship and participating States to use, swiftly and to the greatest extent possible, all available tools and procedures as applicable to a particular crisis or conflict situation."[10] Thus, MC Decision No. 3/11 recognizes the importance of political will and the need to make full use of the OSCE toolbox across the conflict cycle.

With this in mind, over the past two years, the CPC has reviewed the OSCE's crisis-response procedures and has developed and refined it with the aim of translating decisions to use the OSCE toolbox quickly into action on the ground. To this end, the CPC has concentrated on four pillars: finance, people, equipment, and knowledge. The CPC

(a)  developed a proposal for the inclusion of a conflict prevention and crisis management facility in the 2013 Unified Budget Proposal to ensure the availability of financial resources;

(b)  developed, together with the Department for Human Resources, an internal OSCE roster for rapid deployment. This roster is a prerequisite for a hybrid deployment approach, in which first responders to a crisis would be drawn from OSCE staff, who would be replaced by newly recruited staff;

(c)  developed, together with the Department for Management and Finance, a virtual pool of equipment as a tool for providing essential and timely material resources when required;

(d)  drafted an Operational Framework for Crisis Response and conducted crisis response simulations with one field operation and with the incoming Swiss Chairmanship.

The suggestion that the OSCE establish a modest conflict prevention and crisis management facility was welcomed by many delegations during the discussion on the 2013 budget, but ultimately did not find consensus. The logic of such a facility, however, remains unchallenged by a large majority of participating States. Budget planning is currently tighter due to the financial constraints faced by participating States, leaving less room for manoeuvre to finance crisis-response activities – which by their very nature cannot be budgeted in advance – out of existing budgets. In 2012, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo (OMiK) had to cover the extra costs involved in facilitating the par-

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10   MC Decision No. 3/11, cited above (Note 1), para. 8.

ticipation of Serbian citizens living in Kosovo in Serbia's Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, which was in essence a conflict prevention activity, out of its own budget by identifying savings and cutting planned programmatic activities, as there was no mechanism in place to cover unforeseen expenses for crisis response in a timely manner. In the case of Kosovo, OMiK had only five days between the final understanding on the modalities of the facilitation and election day – far too short to engage the procedures usually used to raise funds. While OMiK's size allowed it to cover this unforeseen expense out of its existing budget, smaller field operations would not be in a position to muster such funds. Other tools that could be used to raise funds, such as budget revisions, the Contingency Fund, or the possibility of raising funds through extra-budgetary projects – some of which were used to finance the creation of the Community Security Initiative in 2010 in Kyrgyzstan – require time-consuming procedures. A reserve fund for crisis response, which could be activated within a couple of days or even hours, would add the flexibility and dynamism needed for rapid action carried out within existing mandates as called for in MC Decision 3/11.

Provided financing is secured and a mandate exists to send OSCE staff to a given crisis area, the OSCE still faces the challenge of identifying and deploying the necessary personnel quickly. The rapid deployment roster is designed to address this challenge in a cost-effective manner. It was developed following a debate on the OSCE's Rapid Expert Assistance and Co-operation Teams (REACT) and various other kinds of rosters and just-in-time approaches. Based on discussions held during the third Meeting of the Open-ended Working Group on the Conflict Cycle, the CPC proposed a hybrid solution: a phased approach for deployment in crisis situations, drawing initially on experienced staff from OSCE executive structures (both existing staff and recently departed staff members) as first responders to serve as either reinforcement to an existing OSCE field operation or as the nucleus of a new OSCE field presence. First responders would be replaced, if required, by international and local contract staff as well as seconded mission members recruited through standard OSCE procedures. A list of potential crisis response staff and key qualifications, generic job descriptions, and a staff instruction regulating the administrative procedures related to the functioning of the roster and eventual deployment were worked out. The roster is planned to be fully operational by early 2014.

The establishment of a virtual pool of equipment is a recognition of the fact that storing large amounts of items, from computers to armoured vehicles, as foreseen in the concept of Mission Start-up Kits developed in 2000 is too resource intensive and inefficient for the OSCE, which, unlike the UN, is nowadays not deploying large missions on a short term notice on a regular basis. The pool is intended to be sufficient for a team of up to ten experts deploying within three days. The items include vehicles, satellite and mobile phones, very high frequency (VHF) radios, GPS, generators, computers and

printers, office furniture, personal protective equipment, security cameras, and emergency rations. The pool is grouped in equipment to be: (1) held on stock; (2) purchased just in time; and (3) requested from existing OSCE field operations, other organizations, or participating States. Items are included in one or other of the various groupings based on: (1) the likelihood of the item being needed; (2) the importance of the item to the implementation of early action; (3) the cost of the item; and, (4) the procurement time for the item.

Setting up such tools as the rapid deployment roster or the virtual pool of equipment is a matter of operational preparedness, while using them is a question of an occurring crisis followed by a decision to act. Following the same approach to prepare for effective crisis response by increasing the operational preparedness of the Organization, the CPC has developed an Operational Framework for Crisis Response. The framework is intended as an internal document for use by OSCE executive structures and draws on good practices and lessons already identified from the OSCE's past experiences in crisis response. It covers the internal processes and procedures by which the Organization addresses a crisis/conflict in the OSCE area as well as threats to the security and safety of OSCE staff and assets and infrastructure. While not establishing fixed guidelines on exactly what should or should not be done, it does provide decision makers and those tasked with implementing decisions with details of existing procedures and an overview of what has worked in the past and what tools are available for crisis response in general. Combined with crisis simulations on various levels, this framework will enhance knowledge of OSCE crisis response within the Organization.

*Dialogue Facilitation, Mediation, and Mediation Support*

Recognizing the important role of mediation in conflict prevention and conflict resolution, MC Decision No. 3/11 mandated the OSCE to further strengthen OSCE capabilities in dialogue facilitation and mediation support. In particular, the decision tasked the Secretary General to designate a mediation-support focal point within the CPC and called for the development of a systematic mediation-support capacity within the CPC. MC Decision No. 3/11 outlines the following four pillars for a mediation-support capacity:

(1)  training and capacity-building within the OSCE structures;
(2)  knowledge management and operational guidance;
(3)  outreach, networking, co-operation, and co-ordination with relevant local/national actors and international, regional, and subregional organizations;

129

(4)   operational support to Chairmanships, their Special Representatives, heads of field operations, and other relevant OSCE mediators.[11]

The OSCE can rely on a number of mediation actors as well as particular instruments, mechanisms, and procedures in support of dialogue facilitation and meditation, including the CiO and his or her Special Representatives and Envoys, the SG, the Director of the CPC, heads of OSCE field operations, and OSCE institutions such as the HCNM or ODIHR. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) can also be involved in facilitation and mediation efforts. Furthermore, the OSCE possesses a number of mechanisms and procedures that entail some form of dialogue facilitation through a third party, such as the Mechanism for Consultation and Co-operation as regards Unusual Military Activities of the Vienna Document. Other mechanisms for the political management of crisis and conflict situations also have provisions relating to the CiO's exercise of good offices, mediation, and conciliation. Also worth mentioning are the specific mechanisms on the peaceful settlement of disputes based on conciliation and/or arbitration, such as the "Valletta Mechanism" and the "Provisions for an OSCE Conciliation Commission and for Directed Conciliation", both of which are based on the involvement of a third party, though neither has yet been activated.

Other mechanisms, while not specifically mentioning the role of a third party, can nevertheless be utilized for the peaceful settlement of a crisis or conflict situation. Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/01 on fostering the role of the OSCE as a forum for political dialogue, for example, allows for the PC and the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) to provide a platform for dialogue, with the FSC providing "third party" expert advice.[12] However, in practice these mechanisms are rarely if ever used. Mediation and dialogue facilitation in the OSCE context are mainly carried out by field operations, Special Representatives, and the HCNM, as well as high-level interventions by the CiO and the SG.

The OSCE has, in particular, been engaged in high-level mediation efforts with regard to the protracted conflicts, namely the Geneva International Discussions initiated following the August 2008 conflict in Georgia, the "5+2" negotiations on the Transdniestrian settlement, and the "Minsk Group" process on the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. These high-level mediation efforts are carried out in institutionalized negotiation frameworks that have been established over time. In addition to established formats, the OSCE conducts a number of dialogue facilitation efforts through its field operations. For example, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek established a local net-

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11   Cf. ibid., para. 10.
12   Cf. Decision No. 3, Fostering the Role of the OSCE as a Forum for Political Dialogue, MC(9).DEC/3, para. 8(b), in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Ninth Meeting of the Ministerial Council*, 3 and 4 December 2001, MC.DOC/2/01, Bucharest, 4 December 2001, pp. 25-27, here: pp. 26-27, at: http://www.osce.org/mc/40515.

work of peace messengers with the aim of diffusing tensions at the local level before they can erupt into full-scale conflict.[13]

Strengthening the ability of these actors to provide effective mediation is the aim of the mediation-support capacity within the CPC. Recent developments in other international and regional organizations underline the importance of mediation support. The most developed mediation-support capacity can be found in the United Nations (UN), which hosts a full-fledged Mediation Support Unit (MSU) within the Department of Political Affairs (DPA). The European Union (EU) has set up a Mediation Support Team within the European Union External Action Service (EEAS), and there are currently discussions about the possible establishment of a European Institute for Peace as a semi-autonomous institution to engage in and support mediation processes. The African Union (AU) is also strengthening its mediation-support capacity, with the assistance of non-governmental organizations, such as the Helsinki-based Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), as well as the UN and EU. Other key regional organizations are exploring opportunities for the development or enhancement of their mediation-support capacities, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the League of Arab States (LAS). In other words, the OSCE is in tune with developments across the globe in this respect.

In the OSCE context, initial concrete steps in developing a mediation-support capacity were taken in 2012/2013 based on the mandate contained in MC Decision No. 3/11. Within the CPC, the position of a Mediation Support Officer was created and an Operational Framework for Mediation Support[14] was developed. The aim of the latter document is twofold. Firstly, it provides a comprehensive overview of the OSCE's existing mediation-support capacity while giving senior management and OSCE staff involved in mediation and dialogue facilitation an outline of what mediation support entails and what assistance is available. Secondly, it provides a generic framework for further strengthening the OSCE's mediation-support capacity and thus helps to guide the further work in this respect.

The focus of concrete operational activities with regard to mediation support in 2012/2013 was on training and capacity-building. The integrated training and capacity-building strategy developed by the CPC foresees tailored coaching for high-level mediators, intensive training for mediation support staff working in conflict areas, and basic training for OSCE staff members (in particular in the field) involved in day-to-day mediation efforts. As a part of this strategy, the CPC organized two high-level mediation coaching sessions for Heads of Missions and Special Representatives, a one-

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13     For an overview of the OSCE's various mediation activities, see a recent address by Secretary General Lamberto Zannier at the conference on "Mediation in the OSCE Area" in Bucharest, 15 July 2013, available at: http://www.osce.org/sg/103723.

14     The document was distributed to delegations for their information with the code SEC.GAL/110/13.

week peace-mediation training course for staff members involved directly in mediation processes, and three field training courses on dialogue facilitation.

Some operational support activities have also taken place with the aim of assisting OSCE representatives in ongoing processes. For example, the CPC organized a specialized process-design workshop in South Serbia; a workshop was also held with the Chişinău-based representatives of the mediators and observers in the Transdniestrian settlement process, which combined training on mediation skills with concrete reflections on process design. The CPC has been encouraged by the interest shown by OSCE staff involved in mediation and dialogue facilitation to receive additional training and operational support that will help them to carry out their work.

The CPC has also suggested that the role of OSCE mediators could be strengthened by giving Special Representatives of the CiO involved in the Transdniestrian settlement process and the Geneva Discussions multi-annual mandates. The incoming Swiss and Serbian Chairmanships have followed this advice by supporting the appointment of Special Representatives for the two-year period of their chairmanships (2014 and 2015, respectively).

On knowledge management, the CPC has developed a debriefing methodology to identify lessons from the experiences of high-level OSCE mediators, such as Special Representatives, Heads of Missions, and senior Secretariat representatives. In 2012 and 2013, five such mediation debriefings were organized for outgoing mediators and their support staff.

With regard to outreach and networking, the CPC has increased its contacts with the UN, the EEAS, the OIC, the LAS, the Spanish-Moroccan Initiative for Mediation in the Mediterranean, and relevant civil society actors.

*Conclusions*

As the Helsinki +40 Process moves from its initial orientation phase to discussions on concrete issues, the implementation of MC Decision No. 3/11 with regard to early warning, early action, and mediation is far advanced. That said, many of the tasks laid out in the decision recur, requiring constant action. However, the main work of deciding how to implement these tasks has been completed and concrete tools created and actions undertaken based on the concepts developed. As a result, the Organization is today better prepared and equipped to react quickly and effectively to newly emerging or re-emerging crises. Two caveats are, however, in order: (1) new concepts and procedures are yet to be fully tested in practice; and, (2) the main link between early warning and early action – the political will to take the necessary decision to act – remains unaddressed by this work. This is precisely where the Helsinki +40 Process comes into play: Realizing the vision of a common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community requires

overcoming old divisions and mistrust, building confidence, and transforming relations. Nothing less is necessary to ensure that decisions to address emerging crises and decisive steps to resolve existing conflicts can be taken in the OSCE area by consensus. The CPC's contribution over the past two years with regard to the implementation of MC Decision No. /3/11 has been to provide participating States with the best possible framework for effective conflict prevention and crisis response in the meantime. This work now needs to continue and to expand into other phases of the conflict cycle, in particular conflict resolution.