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The Republic of Macedonia and the OSCE

Preventive Diplomacy in Practice

Since 1990, with the signing of the Charter of Paris, the OSCE has become increasingly engaged in the prevention and management of conflicts in Europe. Although conflict prevention and crisis management constitute relatively new activities for the OSCE, they have become prominent ones because of the many ethnic and local tensions which have surfaced in the regions of Central/Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that since the early 1990s there has been a proliferation of OSCE long-term missions to such diverse countries as for example the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) and its regions of Kosovo, Vojvodina, and Sandjak, the Republic of Macedonia, Bosnia, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Tajikistan, Georgia, and Moldova.

So far, the Republic of Macedonia stands out as one of the relatively successful cases of the OSCE's conflict prevention efforts. Moreover, Macedonia has emerged as a testing ground for collaborative preventive actions on the part of the OSCE and the United Nations. A tiny country of roughly two million inhabitants in the heart of the Balkans, the Republic of Macedonia has had its fair share of ethnic tensions between the Slav Macedonians and ethnic Albanians as well as conflicts with its neighbours, Serbia and Greece. Although the Greek-Macedonian dispute was settled in October 1995 and a normalization of relations with Serbia is in progress since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement and the 1996 Macedonian-Serbian Accord, Macedonia's ethnic conflict, albeit not violent, is likely to remain alive for some time in the future.

Ethnic Albanians, who constitute 22.9 per cent (443,000) of the total population in Macedonia, which is also home to four other smaller ethnic groups, have made four major demands: 1) the constitutional recognition as a nation; 2) the recognition of Albanian as a second, official language of Macedonia; 3) the increase of representation in the armed forces, the police, the legal profession, and higher administration; and 4) the right to an Albanian-language university. These demands continue to stir ethnic Albanian protests, in particular because the Macedonian government has so far opposed the creation of a separate university, fearing that it would cause an outcry among the more nationalist elements in Macedonia, lead to the creation of parallel

structures, and facilitate a growing polarization among ethnic Albanians and Slav Macedonians.¹

Macedonia's relationship with the OSCE is a unique one which in the past, however, was the source of many frustrations. Although the Republic of Macedonia was not officially admitted as a full OSCE participating State until October 1995, the OSCE was among the first of the international organizations to arrive in the country on a preventive mission, even though Macedonia was barred from OSCE participation over Greek objections. A compromise reached in early April 1993, when Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations under the cumbersome name of Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), also paved the way into the OSCE in the same month, albeit only as an observer.

The OSCE Long-term Mission, established in Skopje in the autumn of 1992, was initiated by the Bush administration, following the outbreak of war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It had the explicit mandate to prevent a possible spillover of the Yugoslav war by monitoring Macedonia's borders with Serbia and Albania and the country's internal political and economic conditions. It is not a coincidence that the first three Heads of Mission were from the United States, signalling Washington's commitment to conflict prevention and stability in the region. Macedonia's President Kiro Gligorov, a moderate and pragmatic leader, who was cautious not to play the nationalist card, can also be credited with the effort to secure the early preventive engagement of the international community, including the United Nations which deployed a 1000-men strong preventive force consisting of Scandinavian and American peacekeepers in early 1993, adding yet another preventive pillar to the one that the OSCE already provided.²

The OSCE as an Essential Element of Macedonia's "European Option"

The importance of belonging to Europe is a recurring theme in any official statements on Macedonia's foreign policy. This entails membership in all major European institutions. The OSCE was one of the first international organizations an independent Macedonia applied to for membership. But the process of admission to the OSCE was a frustrating experience. Beginning in January 1992, Macedonia filed numerous applications - perhaps as many as twenty -, but each time, membership considerations were blocked over the

1 See Alice Ackermann, *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: A Relatively Successful Case of Conflict Prevention in Europe*, in: *Security Dialogue* 27/1996, pp. 409-424.

2 Discussed in: Alice Ackermann/Antonio Pala, *From Peacekeeping to Preventive Deployment: A Study of the United Nations in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, in: *European Security* 5/1996, pp. 83-97.

objection of the European Union where Greece used its influence to interfere with the process.

It was not until Macedonia was admitted to the UN that it also received observer status with the OSCE. However, it was only allocated the status of a silent observer, meaning that Macedonia's delegation had to abstain from comments. It was Albania which demanded that Macedonia be admitted as a silent observer because of the strained relations between the two countries at the time. The demand constituted an Albanian attempt to link Macedonia's OSCE participation to improvements in dealing with its ethnic Albanian population. Moreover, Albania itself had initially started out as a silent observer. Not until June 1994 was Macedonia's silent observer status lifted and upgraded to regular observer status.³

Although the circumstances under which the Republic of Macedonia joined the OSCE, first as observer, and then as participating State, had not been favourable, OSCE participation has been of crucial importance in Macedonia's foreign policy because of the appeal it holds for its political leadership to become firmly rooted in Europe's political and security structures. Since Macedonia's independence in September 1992, the "European Option" has topped the list of Skopje's foreign policy objectives which has led President Gligorov and Prime Minister Branko Crvenkovski to seek close political and economic ties to various European organizations such as NATO's Partnership for Peace Program, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the Central European Initiative, in addition to the OSCE.

Membership in these various organizations holds several advantages for Macedonia. First, its political leaders believe that democratic transition and economic reform are facilitated through integration with Europe. Second, a widely-held sentiment is that participation in the OSCE and NATO's Partnership for Peace provides the necessary institutional framework to assure Macedonia's security and guarantee long-term regional stability.⁴ And third, Macedonia's leadership hopes that the country's association with Europe may foster a more European outlook and identity which in due course can create an effective counterbalance to a nationalist Macedonian identity. Even ethnic Albanian leaders in Macedonia emphasize the need for identifying with Europe because of its emphasis on pluralist structures and values and the importance given to the protection of minority rights.⁵

3 OSCE source, telephone interview by author, 4 April 1997.

4 Author's interview with Macedonian Foreign Ministry official, 15 March 1996, Skopje.

5 Author's interviews with Mr. Sami Ibrahim, ethnic Albanian parliamentarian, June 1996, Skopje, and Mr. Arbën Xhaferi, ethnic Albanian party leader (PPDsh), March 1996, Skopje.

Two Major Mechanisms of OSCE Preventive Diplomacy

In the Republic of Macedonia, the OSCE has carried out its preventive action through two mechanisms: the establishment of a spillover mission in the country's capital, Skopje, and the office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). In addition, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has been crucial for assistance in the census and elections held in 1994.

The decision to establish an OSCE mission in Macedonia was taken on 18 September 1992, during a meeting of the OSCE's Committee of Senior Officials (CSO). It followed a CSO decision on 14 August to send an exploratory mission to Macedonia by mid-September to investigate the conditions in the country and to probe the willingness on the part of the Macedonian government to accept a spillover mission. The delegation met with President Gligorov and other government officials, but also sought out the representatives of the ethnic Albanians, such as Nevzat Halili, then the leader of the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PPD). Moreover, the exploratory mission visited various checkpoints on the border to Serbia, Albania, and Bulgaria to obtain a better understanding of the potential threats facing Macedonia from its neighbours, in particular Serbia, and to evaluate the destabilizing impact of the war waging to the north on the country's economic situation.

The delegation's report, submitted to the Chairman-in-Office underlined that "leaders of the government were eager to receive the CSCE Monitor Mission and to co-operate unreservedly in starting up spillover monitoring operations as expeditiously as possible". The report also reiterated the fear expressed by the Macedonian political leadership of a wider Balkan war, citing a number of potential triggers for violence: 1) Macedonia's cut-off of oil supplies from Greece which was destabilizing politically and economically; 2) an influx of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina; 3) a possible outbreak of violence in Kosovo; 4) the lack of a viable defence capability, making it impossible to monitor the 240 kilometres long border with Serbia; and 5) mounting domestic unrest over demands by ethnic Albanians. Concluding, the report recommended the mission because of "a genuine risk of spillover of the Yugoslav conflict" and suggested that monitoring tasks be carried out along Macedonia's border with Serbia, including Kosovo.⁶

Shortly after the 16th CSO Meeting, it was agreed to establish a long-term mission with headquarters in Skopje and additional posts in Tetovo, a largely-Albanian populated city close to the Kosovo border, and Kumanovo, a town near the Serbian border. U.S. Ambassador Robert Frowick, now in charge of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia, was appointed Head of Mission.

⁶ Cf. CSCE, Secretariat, CSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje, in: CSCE Communication No. 282, Prague, 16 September 1992.

He arrived in Skopje in late September 1992, after which he negotiated with the Macedonian government the so-called Articles of Understanding. Signed on 5 November 1992, the Articles of Understanding included provisions defining diplomatic relations between the Republic of Macedonia and the OSCE. Macedonia's leadership also agreed to co-operate with the OSCE Mission and to provide any information essential for assisting the Mission in carrying out its mandate. To avoid the controversial name Macedonia, which the Greek government was contesting on grounds that it belonged exclusively to a region in the northern part of Greece, the OSCE came up with a compromise solution, calling its Mission the Spillover Monitoring Mission to Skopje.⁷

With its relatively small staff of six to eight monitors, the OSCE Mission has operated on two levels: on a formal, official level by maintaining frequent contacts with Macedonia's political elites, party and religious leaders, and various political organizations; but Mission members also use non-official contacts, such as those with journalists, trade union leaders, and the local population, to monitor economic and social conditions or problems arising in the border regions of Macedonia which may have the potential to escalate into violent confrontations. In fact, the OSCE Mission depends not only on government sources but on these informal channels to engage in effective early warning and prevention.

As part of its monitoring responsibilities, OSCE Mission members over time have attended to many different tasks, including the situation in Kosovo, all incidents involving ethnic relations, the impact of refugees, border security, and the degree of political and economic stability in the country. Ethnic tensions have absorbed much of the OSCE Mission's attention. In the spring of 1995, for example, it investigated the death of an ethnic Albanian killed by police forces during the opening ceremonies of the Albanian-language university in the city of Tetovo, considered illegal by the Macedonian government. Regular site visits in villages and towns along Macedonia's borders with Albania and Serbia have also been crucial in the monitoring of potential sources of threats to the struggling country. The OSCE Mission, with the assistance of the ODIHR, was also actively involved in the monitoring of a highly-controversial census in the summer of 1994 and parliamentary and presidential elections a few months later. At this point, the Mission continues to monitor the growing unrest among the ethnic Albanian population over the refusal of the government to permit the establishment of an Albanian-language university and other matters concerning inter-ethnic relations.

7 Interview with General Giorgio Blais, Deputy Head of Mission, OSCE Spillover Monitoring Mission to Skopje, 4 May 1995, Skopje. See also Giorgio Blais, Experiences with CSCE Monitoring in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in: Jürgen Altmann *et al.*, (Eds.), *Verification After the Cold War: Broadening the Process*, Amsterdam 1994, p. 302.

The Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities provides another crucial mechanism by which the OSCE exercises its early warning and preventive capabilities. Established at the Helsinki Summit in 1992, following a Dutch initiative, it was envisioned that the HCNM would be responsible for early warning and early action. However, the HCNM's mandate left undefined how preventive diplomacy was to be practised. Thus, it has been up to the OSCE's first High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoel, to interpret the mandate. He has done so through regular fact-finding missions to the Republic of Macedonia, where he has met with governmental officials and leaders of various ethnic groups and parties, and through his mediation efforts in ethnically-divisive issues such as citizenship requirements, television and radio programmes for ethnic Albanians and other ethnic groups, the representation of Albanians in certain professions, and educational and language issues. Between 1993 and 1995, a most critical period for Macedonia, Ambassador van der Stoel conducted eleven fact-finding missions to the country, visiting Skopje and other cities in western Macedonia, where most of the ethnic Albanian population resides. All of these visits were followed up by recommendations directed towards the government to facilitate positive changes in inter-ethnic relations.

Specifically, Ambassador van der Stoel, has acted as mediator to resolve some of the disputes over language and educational rights, such as for example, the controversy over Tetovo University, which Albanians argue is important for the maintenance of their cultural identity. Van der Stoel has repeatedly questioned the government's motivation for opposing an Albanian-language university and has purported several alternative solutions, including the creation of a trilingual (English, Macedonian, Albanian) Higher Education Centre for Public Administration and Business which, he felt, might defuse the tensions.

In March 1997, the OSCE and the High Commissioner also responded to several domestic and regional crises. These were sparked off by student protests over the government's decision to allow the use of Albanian as the language of instruction at the Pedagogical Institute in Skopje, steps taken by some ethnic Albanian mayors towards the regionalization of communities in which ethnic Albanians have a majority which violates the constitution, and the unrest in Albania. While the student protests have now abided, inter-ethnic tensions still remain volatile because some ethnic Albanian leaders, who represent parties not in coalition with the government, insist that Tetovo University be legalized, and that there be a broader interpretation on the law of self-rule.

Conclusions

Macedonia not only takes pride in being a member of the OSCE and other European institutions, but is also actively involved in the search for a more comprehensive political, economic, and security arrangement for the Southern Balkans. Its delegation to the OSCE in Vienna has brought forth a proposal for transforming the Spillover Mission to Skopje into an OSCE Mission to the Southern Balkans. The objective behind this initiative is that such a mission could co-ordinate policies on economic co-operation, on regional security, and on questions regarding national minorities among several Balkan states. But so far, the Macedonia initiative has not received much support from other OSCE States in the region.

While public opinion is beginning to question the legitimacy for yet another renewal of the Spillover Mission's mandate on 30 June 1997, now that the Bosnian war is over and that there is significant improvement in relations with Macedonia's neighbours, there is a consensus among the political leadership that the OSCE Mission should remain for the time being. There are several reasons for this, including the unrest and violence in Albania, the protracted tensions over unmet demands of ethnic Albanians and their frustrations over the slow progress in change,⁸ and concerns over the outcome of investigations regarding a pyramid scheme similar to one which triggered the political crisis in Albania.

It is not surprising, however, that since 1996, the Spillover Mission finds itself redefining its mandate in light of the changing circumstances in the region. Last year, the OSCE Mission began to shift its emphasis towards supporting the building of civil society and democratic institutions with specific projects, but much of this remains limited because of budget constraints.

Although it had to face so many obstacles in becoming an OSCE participating State because of the irresponsible policy of the Greek government towards the newly independent country, Macedonia has emerged as one of the most successful cases of preventive diplomacy executed by the OSCE. It is also in Macedonia, where the OSCE and the UN for the first time worked in a co-ordinated fashion, largely through the exchange of information and frequent meetings among the respective Heads of Mission. So far, Macedonia has demonstrated that conflict prevention can work when preventive actions are taken early enough and with the support of a network of regional and international institutions.

8 See here for example a statement by Arbën Xhaferi in: Mike O'Connor, Albanians are Restless in a Neighboring Land, in: New York Times, 20 March 1997, p. A6.