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The Skrunda Agreement and the OSCE's Involvement - An Example of Conflict Prevention and Confidence- Building

Background

During the Cold War the former Soviet Union, like the United States, had installed an early-warning belt on its territory to protect itself against the surprise attack from the intercontinental missiles of the other super-power. The installations in question, which are exclusively for the observation of outer space, were set up in various republics, among them the former Soviet Republic of Latvia. This installation, which will be discussed here, is located in Skrunda, about 160 kilometres west of Riga, on an area of about 200 acres "in the middle of nowhere". It includes not only the technical facilities and the related supply components but also housing for the soldiers and their families, a school, a kindergarten and even a hospital.

When Russia agreed in 1994 to withdraw its troops from the Baltic states, it attached the condition that it be allowed to continue to operate the early-warning station in Skrunda with its soldiers stationed in Latvia until there was an adequate substitute. But it became clear in the initial conversations between Latvia and Russia that this continued operation with practically no time limit was not workable.

The Skrunda Agreement and the Involvement of the OSCE

After intense negotiations the Latvians and Russians on 30 April 1994 signed an "Agreement between the Republic of Latvia and the Russian Federation on the Legal Status of the Skrunda Radar Station during its Temporary Operation and Dismantling" which entered into force on 1 September 1994. This Agreement, which must always be viewed in the context of the withdrawal of Russian troops from Latvia, allowed the Russians to go on running the radar facility in Skrunda until 31 August 1998. An additional one and a half years, until 29 February 2000, were agreed upon for the dismantling. By that time, at the latest, the last active Russian soldier must have left Latvia. Five million US-Dollars a year are to be paid as rental to the Latvian government.

After concluding the Agreement both parties approached the OSCE in June 1994 and asked them to arrange monitoring the modalities agreed upon. In February 1995 the OSCE decided to honour this request by the parties to the Agreement. At the end of May 1995 a joint working group of Latvians and

Russians under the chairmanship of an OSCE Representative, the Joint Committee, began working in Latvia. This Representative's responsibilities had already been set forth as follows by the Permanent Committee (since 1995: Permanent Council) on 30 June 1994:

- monitoring and co-ordinating the implementation of the Agreement;
- initiating and participating in discussions on issues related to the implementation of the Agreement and participating in decisions taken by the Joint Committee on the basis of consensus;
- participating in the creation of procedural and organizational modalities for the functioning of the Joint Committee;
- reporting regularly through the Chairman-in-Office to the Permanent Committee/Council.

In August of 1995 an international OSCE team carried out the baseline inspection of the Russian radar station in Skrunda. This was for practical purposes an inventory so that in later inspections the faithfulness of both parties to the Agreement could be examined. In December the first periodic inspection took place and was followed by five others in the course of 1996, 1997 and 1998. On 31 August 1998 the radar facility was switched off in accordance with the terms of the Agreement, thus ending the "period of temporary operation". This phase was at the beginning coloured by the common past, by many emotions on both sides and obvious scepticism about the capabilities of the OSCE, especially on the part of the Russians. But in the Joint Committee people learned very quickly that "you don't necessarily have to love each other in order to do business together". Besides, the competence and the manner of the experts involved soon convinced both partners of their firm determination to fulfil not only the letter but the spirit of the Agreement. After a short time the working group developed into a team in which the national interests on both sides were clearly represented but where understanding was always shown for the situation of the partner. The OSCE was convincing as an honest broker and neutral mediator and succeeded in communicating that they would treat both parties to the Agreement on a totally equal basis. Moreover, experts from more than a dozen OSCE participating States concluded on the basis of their inspections that both parties were holding precisely to the terms of the Agreement. During the entire phase of operation no objections were raised as a result of the inspections.

After the station was shut down on 31 August 1998 the "period of dismantling" began, on 1 September 1998. In accordance with the Agreement, an OSCE team determined officially on 3 September, three days after the shut-down, that Russia had taken Skrunda off of the net. Because of the excellent Russian co-operation the experts were able to confirm that the Skrunda radar station had not only been switched off but that it was in fact no longer functional.

During the phase of operation the OSCE had to make sure that the technical parameters of the radar station were being maintained and no changes made, that the amounts agreed upon were not being exceeded with regard to personnel, weapons and ammunition and that no modernization measures were being taken. As for the Latvians it was important to check whether they were supplying the station with electricity and water, providing the needed frequencies and generally ensuring untroubled operation of the station, as the Agreement stipulated.

For the dismantling phase it was of course necessary to use different monitoring procedures and criteria, ones which the treaty parties had agreed to in early summer 1998. Under the Agreement the Russians are responsible for the complete dismantlement of the two technical areas ("technical items one and two"). The Latvians bear responsibility for the administrative aspects: housing, hospital, kindergarten and school. Two working groups were set up on the Latvian side, both of which concern themselves with technical and environmental aspects. Together the treaty parties worked out a protocol that specifies how dismantlement should proceed for every building in the technical areas. On recommendation of the OSCE it was agreed that buildings would be dismantled only to ground level and that on the whole no experts would participate or be used. Good old "common sense" is to be the most important criterion in the dismantling phase. This is important not least because the Agreement, which all in all was very well and carefully negotiated, is deliberately held in very general terms with regard to the dismantling stage and on recultivation, for example, says only that "the area has to be recultivated if necessary". The concept of recultivation is not defined and there is no stipulation of who would decide on its necessity.

The first OSCE inspection during the dismantling period was carried out in December 1998 and two others followed in May and August/September of 1999. The results make clear that the parties' faithfulness to the Agreement remains unchanged and that the monitoring and support procedures worked out by the OSCE for the dismantlement phase have proved successful. The dismantlement of installations in the technical areas is largely finished. The four giant antennas, each one 200 metres long and almost 25 metres high, have already been completely disassembled. The staff, along with weapons and ammunition, has been reduced to an absolute minimum. One can assume with confidence that the Skrunda Mission will be concluded in 1999, i.e. before 29 February 2000 as specified in the Agreement. A date for the twelfth periodic inspection, which will also be the last, is to be set at a meeting of the Joint Committee on 1 October.

Hence we can say that the Skrunda operation was not only on track but well ahead of schedule.

Evaluation

The main reasons for the successful implementation of the Skrunda Agreement are as follows:

1. Both parties to the Agreement want a political achievement to be able to improve their mutual relations and to demonstrate to the international community that it can rely on both countries.
2. The negotiations between Latvians and Russians before conclusion of the Agreement were conducted carefully and professionally. International assistance provided both support and guidance without being forced on the parties. A mediator and advisor must always act in such a way that not he but the parties themselves reach and determine the result - or are at least of the opinion that they have done so! That is the only way to create a solid foundation that can stand up to the pressure of the situation.
3. The Agreement concluded between the parties is clear and unambiguous. It provides enough leeway for good initiatives by the parties and is nevertheless sufficiently detailed in most areas to preclude misinterpretation. Where there is any doubt it is better to negotiate longer rather than having to alter the result after the fact. It made sense to register the Agreement with the UN.
4. None of the "key-players" on the local scene were replaced. This made for an excellent working atmosphere and relationships of personal trust. Emotions were increasingly excluded; the work was and is still being carried out with great efficiency. It is people who without doubt play the main role in implementing political decisions. In addition to having knowledgeability and expertise, "the chemistry has to be right".
5. The OSCE has developed a good plan for monitoring compliance with the Agreement. Both instruments, the Joint Committee for the daily work and the inspections for supplemental international monitoring, have proved effective.

The OSCE made the right decision in sending an on-site Representative to Latvia rather than conducting its monitoring and support activity on a travel basis, as originally planned. Without its man on the spot the OSCE's success would not have been possible. For one thing, the volume of work was such that treating the Skrunda Mission as a secondary matter would not have functioned; moreover, it is always advantageous for the parties to have an OSCE Representative readily available on short notice. It can also have a calming effect... The Federal Republic of Germany clearly deserves great credit in this matter. Not only did it make a man available for the job but it also assumed all related costs. The OSCE always acts as a *partner whose function is to serve* and does not try to dominate the parties or constantly to

put across its own ideas. This approach has proved itself in the day to day work. As long as the Russians and Latvians were and are satisfied with the fulfilment of the Agreement there is no need for the OSCE to act. The OSCE Representative has always seen himself as the person who, as it were, takes both parties on his shoulders so that they are always on an equal footing and can talk with each other at eye level, so to speak. From time to time one needs shoulders of differing strength for this purpose...! The method of "low noise and low profile" as applied to the daily work has proved effective just as has the principle of "whenever possible: business as usual". Thus the Joint Committee meets and will continue to meet once a month - alternately in the radar station at Skrunda and in the Latvian foreign ministry in Riga - whether or not there are any special items on the agenda. It is important to see each other regularly, to grow together as a team and remain that way. "Business as usual" also applies to the semi-annual inspections provided for in the Agreement, although one or another might occasionally have been omitted. And so it is also correct that the periodic inspections are being retained in the period of dismantling. In this connection it is also a question of "showing the flag"! Another thing that has proved useful in these periodic inspections is the practice of using only high-level staff officers who have international experience and through their rank emphasize the importance of the inspections. It was also astute to provide both officers with the support of a civilian radar expert during the period of operation. Using the second staff officer in the team of the first inspection as leader of the following one is a procedure which provides the necessary continuity in monitoring and supporting the parties. It can be assumed that in the months remaining there will be no noteworthy difficulties in the implementation of the Agreement so long as the political will of the parties does not change and the "key-players" remain in the "game". Before the end of 1999 a team of experts from the OSCE will carry out the final inspection in Skrunda and determine whether the terms of the Skrunda Agreement have been fulfilled and, hence, that the withdrawal of Russian troops from Latvia has been completed.¹

1 Due to the exemplary co-operation of the parties to the Agreement and fully accepted OSCE support, the Skrunda operation, which was officially planned to last until 29 February 2000, could be completed four months earlier.
The last OSCE inspection was implemented on 19 October 1999. Experts from Switzerland, France and Germany verified that the radar station had been completely dismantled. Both parties to the Agreement appeared to be very satisfied with the results. The Latvians were especially pleased that the environmental conditions were all fulfilled.
On 21 October the Latvian Foreign Minister and the Russian Ambassador informed the media and the accredited ambassadors in Riga that the Skrunda Agreement had been completed.
On 25 October the last active Russian soldier left Latvia and on 28 October both parties to the Agreement exchanged diplomatic notes documenting its expiration.
On 2 December Colonel Hübschen informed the Permanent Council of the OSCE that the Skrunda Mission had been completed. Hence this was the first operation in OSCE history that was successfully completed even before its pre-set deadline.
The OSCE Representative concluded the mandate on 1 February 2000.

In line with the OSCE's main goal, it has proved possible in Skrunda to achieve additional security through confident co-operation. And so the concept for implementation of the Skrunda Agreement of having a Joint Committee in the field under OSCE direction and supplemental international inspections using OSCE teams could certainly serve as a model for comparable operations in the future. That also holds true for the aspect that with the expiration and fulfilment of the Agreement a mission will have for the first time in the history of the OSCE been brought to an end on its own initiative and the Representative will be able to leave the country.