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Between Strategic Re-orientation and Operational Fixes: Current Challenges and Opportunities in Strengthening Early Warning and Early Action as Part of OSCE Crisis and Conflict Prevention

The evolution of politically-binding commitments goes hand in hand with the changing historical context in which they occurred.¹

Introduction

Early warning and early action have been promoted worldwide as key aspects of a proactive foreign and security policy agenda since the early 2000s. Against the background of the sharp rise in regional conflicts in the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus, as well as western and central Africa during the 1990s, this development is representative of an enhanced focus in foreign policy thinking on the early prevention of conflicts. Given the disastrous humanitarian, economic, and (geo-)political consequences of violent conflicts, the attempt to identify unstable situations that could lead to the outbreak of violent conflict and fuel escalation spirals and to act to counter them as early as possible characterizes the approach of a wide range of international, regional, and national actors nowadays. One of the central elements in the political and economic debate on the added value of early warning is based on one of the oldest arguments for conflict prevention, namely that it offers more cost-effective instruments for long-term conflict management.² According to this logic, early warning is an important step towards the development and implementation of conflict prevention measures. In view of the growing number and complexity of factors that can cause conflicts, it appears certain that managing the many aspects of conflict prevention is now far beyond the ability of individual nation states. It is therefore hardly surprising that the institutionalization of early warning, which requires a high degree of integration of all kinds of executive bodies and authorities, correlates to a high degree with the global rise of regional security organizations. Today, the most important linkage between early warning and early action is not at the level the nation state but has gradually matured into a major aspect of the work of regional security organizations. Despite numerous differences and distinctive features, the early-warning systems of the European Union (EU), African

1 OSCE Secretariat, Conflict Prevention Centre, Operations Service, *The OSCE Concept of Comprehensive and Co-operative Security. An Overview of Major Milestones*, SEC.GAL/100/09, Vienna, 17 June 2009, p. 1, at: <http://www.osce.org/cpc/37592>.

2 Cf. Gareth Evans, Cooperative Security and Intrastate Conflict, in: *Foreign Policy*, 96 (Fall 1994), pp. 3-20.

Union (AU), and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – not to mention subregional organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) – are characterized by a highly methodologized understanding of early warning as a political instrument for the appropriate, early, and context-specific development of options for political action. Overall, early warning in this sense is understood as a political and operational mechanism that

1. is focused on the systematic gathering and analysis of information from potential crisis regions;
2. organizes and evaluates this information using global and regional experience, e.g. indicator lists;
3. develops recommendations for early intervention by exploring options for action, inputs these into the decision-making processes of responsible institutions and actors, and prepares them for application.³

This three-step process from early warning to early political and operational action also characterizes the OSCE's current approach. It reflects a fundamental shift in the perception and execution of conflict management. Since the early 1990s and the end of the Cold War, intra- and transnational challenges, the consequences of failing statehood and ethnic tensions have taken on new significance and led to the development of new political strategies and instruments in the CSCE/OSCE. Early warning, as an integral aspect of civil conflict and crisis prevention, has become one of the new paradigms.

Early Warning and Early Action in the OSCE

The Vienna-based Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) acts as the clearing house for the systematic collection of early-warning information within the OSCE's early-warning mechanism. The second step is for recommendations for the practical implementation of early action measures to enter the political decision-making process via the OSCE Secretariat. The role of the OSCE's central executive structures in the processes of analysis, evaluation, and strategic development of early warning and early action has grown steadily since 2011. The CPC and the Secretariat took an innovative and promising approach, bringing together various OSCE actors in a systematic process of exchange and thus combining their diverse abilities and capacities in the areas of early warning and early action. Thus, a network of early warning focal points was established on the basis of OSCE Ministerial Council Decision

3 For a general summary of definitions and methodologies of early-warning systems in foreign and security policy, see: Michael S. Lund, *Preventive Diplomacy and American Foreign Policy. A Guide for the Post-Cold War Era*, draft manuscript, Washington 1994, and Sean P. O'Brien, Crisis Early Warning and Decision Support. Contemporary Approaches and Thoughts on Future Research, in: *International Studies Review* 1/2010, pp. 87-104.

No. 3/11 on Elements of the Conflict Cycle.⁴ This enabled the field operations and project offices throughout the OSCE area, the Hague-based Office of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw to share their analyses with the relevant working units of the Secretariat in Vienna. The broad and cross-dimensional mandate granted to the OSCE and its executive structures in the 2011 Vilnius Decision reflects the multi-dimensional and comprehensive understanding of the causes of conflicts that is at the heart of the OSCE's concept of security. Since December 2011, this understanding has also characterized the process of implementing capabilities for early warning and early action.

The annual network meetings of the early-warning focal points have raised the exchange between the various executive structures to a new institutional level. These meetings were used to discuss and develop guidelines and indicator lists, which offer tangible benefits for an integrated approach.⁵ Precisely in view of the smouldering potential for escalation in the many unresolved conflicts in the OSCE area, these measures are far more than an organizational circle jerk. The establishment of a network of focal points and the development of internal guidelines on early warning are characteristic of the path the Organization has taken in recent years, which aims at a major enhancement of the role of conflict prevention on the OSCE agenda. The task assigned to the Secretary General in Paragraph 4 of Decision No. 3/11, to "provide 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"⁶ should also be understood against this background. The intention here is for the Secretariat to become a kind of clearing house for expertise and knowledge in the form of early-warning information, and thus to create political awareness and contribute to the OSCE's practical efforts in the area of conflict management by proposing recommendations for action. Comparable early-warning efforts have become commonplace among regional security organizations worldwide with the aim of influencing the creation of political will among their members at the earliest possible opportunity.⁷ ECOWAS, which can build on decades of experience in early warning and possesses one of the most effectively institutionalized early-warning

4 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Vilnius 2011, *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, 7 December 2011, at: <http://www.osce.org/mc/86621>.

5 The OSCE guidelines for early warning and early action are circulated internally as document SEC.GAL/52/12.

6 Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/11, cited above (Note 4), p. 3.

7 Cf. Herbert Wulf/Tobias Debiel, *Conflict early warning and response mechanisms: tools for enhancing the effectiveness of regional organisations? A comparative study of the AU, ECOWAS, IGAD, ASEAN/ARF and PIF*, Crisis States Research Centre Working Paper No. 49, London 2009.

systems, shows this. Since 2003, the West African early-warning system ECOWARN has had a direct line to the ECOWAS Commission, and has thus played an important role in generating country-specific situation updates and recommendations for action and providing these to Commission members in order to minimize friction in the transformation of early warning into early action. Since the Vilnius Decision, the connection between early warning and early action has been a linchpin of the OSCE's conflict-prevention system.

The Translation of Early Warning into Early Action as a Permanent Work in Progress

The resumption in April 2014 of fighting in the conflict around Nagorno-Karabakh, which appears to be anything but frozen, revealed one weakness of the OSCE approach in particular: Early warning does not necessarily lead to preventive measures and early action. While a picture of the concentration and movement of troops and materiel along the contact line that was highly accurate in parts was transmitted to capitals of the participating States and to the Vienna Hofburg, it did not prove possible to translate these early-warning signals into practical political action. As so often, the OSCE was cursed to merely witness the accelerating escalation as report after report on military activity near the border had little effect. As in the run-up to the five-day Russian-Georgian War of 2008, two paradigmatic problems that the OSCE has had to deal with for years became apparent: (1) *The failure to effectively carry over early warning onto the level of political dialogue* among participating States, which continues to be the precondition for achieving consensus on early action and, closely related, (2) *the lack of political will* and consensus among stakeholders and participating States to recognize or use the OSCE as an instrument for conflict prevention, precisely because early action would have to be directed at the very same states when necessary.⁸

Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/11 shows that the Organization, and particularly the Secretariat and the CPC, have identified the critical point of connection between early warning and early action. The desire to raise early warning and early action up the agenda for political dialogue and action among the participating States reflects the CSCE/OSCE's experience of dramatic crises and conflicts since the 1990s. Particularly cogent are the protracted conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, and Transdniestria and the OSCE's field activities in the former Yugoslavia, and particularly in Kosovo (1991). The various phases of the OSCE's involvement in these crises and conflicts are closely connected to the achievement of significant milestones

8 For a brief analysis of the problems and challenges in the area of conflict prevention, and particularly in early warning and early action, see: Claus Neukirch, *Early Warning and Early Action – Current Developments in OSCE Conflict Prevention Activities*, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2013*, Baden-Baden 2014, pp. 123-133.

in the area of conflict prevention, including the Helsinki Document (1992), the Corfu Process (2009), and Decision 3/11. With the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine in 2014, a new chapter was added to this experience, one that painfully called to mind the enormous challenges that the OSCE faces. Many of the initiatives begun during the Swiss Chairmanship in 2014 show that the ongoing reflection on and strengthening of OSCE capabilities in civil crisis and conflict management and conflict prevention have since advanced to become major priorities for action.⁹ The German Chairmanship took up this engagement, developed it further, and embedded it in the framework of a broadly conceived attempt to initiate a structured dialogue on enhancing the OSCE's capabilities in the conflict cycle. From the start, the strategies and activities of the German Chairmanship focused on practical issues of conflict management in Ukraine and other protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Transdniestria, and particularly on the issue of the long-term strengthening of the OSCE's capabilities along the conflict cycle in line with experience.¹⁰

Renewing and raising the profile of problem-oriented dialogue on security and co-operation in the OSCE area is at the heart of the structured dialogue process launched by Berlin. This initiative is typical of the acknowledged need to adjust the OSCE's portfolio to the requirements of a new and fragmented security environment. The image of an OSCE renaissance, with the Organization functioning as a stand-alone agent for peace in the midst of tense relations between East and West, has frequently been deployed in the language of this initiative and demonstrates the growing willingness of those that support it to see the long-term orientation of the Organization as lying in the civil management of conflicts. One central focus of the discussions between the representatives of the 57 participating States, the OSCE offices, and the OSCE institutions that took place at the round tables in Vienna during the German Chairmanship was the effective, problem-oriented, and closer integration of early warning and early action such as preventive diplomacy and mediation. Both the discussion of opportunities for capacity building in OSCE mediation and mediation support and the second round table on early warning and early action were dominated by the question of how the OSCE's existing conflict-prevention capabilities could be brought to bear in a more focused manner while also increasing their political relevance in the OSCE context. All in all, the result of the Vienna round tables, the ambassadors' retreat in September 2016, the Chairmanship conference on "The OSCE as Mediator: Instruments – Challenges – Potentials", and the experience newly

9 Cf. Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft [Swiss Confederation], Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, *The Swiss Chairmanship of the OSCE 2014, Final Report*, 27 May 2015, at: https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/eda/en/documents/publications/InternationaleOrganisation/en/osze/Beilage-01-Schlussbericht_EN.pdf.

10 Cf. The Federal Government, *Renewing dialogue, rebuilding trust, restoring security. The priorities of the German OSCE Chairmanship in 2016*, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/215791>.

gained in dealing with crises and conflicts have focused attention on a range of practical and strategic fields that decisively influence the effectiveness and applicability of the OSCE's capacities in the early phases of the conflict cycle.

The Institutional Dimension of Early-Warning and Early Action in the OSCE

Compared to many other regional actors, the OSCE faces particularly steep hurdles in turning its operational actions into policy, especially in the area of early warning and early action. The ubiquity of the consensus principle, the essential feature of the OSCE's inclusive character, is in itself an enormous procedural challenge and a major drag on *institutional autonomy of action*. Yet the latter is of major importance for linking early warning to early action, since effective conflict prevention inevitably requires greater responsiveness than is afforded by the Permanent Council's weekly sessions. The OSCE's experiences in the Ukraine Crisis and the establishment of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) have recently demonstrated this clearly once again.

Nevertheless – and here we see the real potential of a structured dialogue process – since the resumption of violence in Nagorno-Karabakh and the conflict in Ukraine, the OSCE has proved its worth as one of the few remaining platforms for dialogue on security and co-operation in Europe. The absence of a clear political consensus, or, more precisely, the constructive ambiguity of political compromises has been a historical feature of the OSCE since the 1970s and the starting point for political discussion on particularly controversial questions.¹¹ Against this background, the lack of consensus on the institutional strengthening of the OSCE in the area of conflict prevention should not be seen as an inevitable fact of life. It is rather the result of decades of failed or poorly supported political dialogue on norms and interests. The early identification of conflicts, early action, and the establishment of preventive structures for dialogue support or mediation have the potential to significantly increase the added value the OSCE can offer as a civil force for peace in the tense field of European security. No other organization on the Eurasian landmass has an equivalent level of regional inclusivity in its executive structures that would grant its political actions the same level of legitimacy, whether in early warning or mediation. In addition, thanks to its field operations, project co-ordinators, and Chairpersons' special representatives, the OSCE offers numerous opportunities for leveraging local knowledge and practical capabilities, which are of inestimable importance for effective early warning and early action, as discussed below.

Effective conflict prevention can only be based on a stable foundation of crisis-resistant channels for dialogue and modern instruments for commu-

11 Cf. Wilhelm Höynck, *From CSCE to OSCE: statements and speeches of Dr. Wilhelm Höynck, Secretary General of the OSCE (1993-1996)*, Vienna 1996.

nication and confidence-building.¹² In other words, early warning can only successfully translate into early action when the information, warning signs, and political recommendations for action generated by the OSCE's executive structures ultimately enter the institutionalized discourse among the participating States. This is the basic precondition for the timely and effective formation of political will in any multilateral system, and in the OSCE in particular. Bilateral channels can certainly be useful as an initial means of activating a coalition of stakeholders, but, in the long term, they are no substitute for the OSCE's multilateral and consensus-based decision-making structures. The experiences of recent decades have shown that long-term efforts to avoid the OSCE's need for consensus by making use of bilateral channels or other non-OSCE forums do not contribute to the creation of sustained political will towards conflict resolution – quite the reverse. In fact, constructive multilateralism, which is considered a guiding principle by at least a significant proportion of European states, is built on the idea that consensus does not describe a natural situation but is rather the result of dialogue and the balancing of interests between states.

It therefore remains important to continue to work to revive the OSCE's institutional channels for negotiation, particularly the Permanent Council. There are already plenty of initiatives that seek this: During the second round table on early warning and early action, the possibility of a more proactive role for the Secretary General in fulfilling his early-warning mandate was stressed several times.¹³ In practice, however, this has rarely occurred, partly because the agenda item “review of current issues” has tended to be reduced to a platform for issuing ritualized condemnatory monologues relating to current conflicts – e.g. between Russia and Ukraine or Armenia and Azerbaijan. That is why the Chairmanship and Troika states, in particular, should continue and intensify efforts to use their political clout to urge other states to inform the Secretary General on crisis-relevant developments in the OSCE area, thus allowing the early-warning signals and potential options for early action generated by the OSCE to play a bigger role and to influence decision-making processes in the Permanent Council at the earliest possible opportunity. In this context, the participating States, and above all the Chairperson-in-Office, should make greater use of preparatory bilateral meetings to leverage national early-warning information and scenario-planning expertise to expand the Secretary General's room for manoeuvre and enhance his early-warning function. Furthermore, the Chairperson's various regional special representatives could support the diversification of dialogue in the Hofburg by presenting reports on the various crisis regions more frequently than hitherto. As non-partisan intermediaries between the conflict parties and envoys

12 Cf. Alice Ackermann, *The Idea and Practice of Conflict Prevention*, in: *Journal of Peace Research*, 3/2003, pp. 339-347.

13 The second round table of the German OSCE Chairmanship on the conflict cycle was held in the Vienna Hofburg under the title “*Early Warning-Early Action: Narrowing the Gap*”.

of the Chairmanship, the special representatives have a special place in the OSCE complex and are often in a position to complement the Secretary General's institutional role thanks to their insight into regional realities and closeness to the Organization's field operations and project offices.

In addition, precisely for the state holding the Chairmanship of the OSCE, it is of central importance to recognize the weaknesses of the channels in Vienna that are currently blocked and bypass these by regularly offering and consulting flexible dialogue formats. While discussions in formal forums, particularly in the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) and the Permanent Council, were being increasingly overshadowed by off-topic disputes among the participating States, specialized discussions on specific issues concerning how the OSCE should undertake civil conflict management continued to be carried out in various supplementary dialogue formats. The Vienna round tables have shown that there is no shortage of common interests, for instance, when it comes to elaborating an early-warning follow-up mechanism covering activities related to fact finding and needs assessment.¹⁴

Against the background of current tensions in political dialogue, a major breakthrough in the institutional strengthening of the OSCE appears difficult or impossible. Nonetheless, and this is one of the lessons that can be drawn from the CSCE process, politically binding commitments – and subsequent operational instruments – are built on a foundation of long-term dialogue and gradual, pragmatic co-operation. To give a new impetus to this exchange of opinions, it is worth looking at processes based on the OSCE's experiences in the field, as these, away from the political and institutional levels, have become some of the most important sources for the development of practical resources in recent years.

The Regional and Local Dimension: Tapping Knowledge and Practical Resources

Since the early 1990s, the OSCE's field activities have gradually evolved into the centrepiece of the Organization's engagement in civil crisis and conflict management. The OSCE now maintains a broad network of project offices and field missions throughout its area of operation.¹⁵ The outbreak and escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 also gave a considerable boost to the OSCE's significance as an actor on the ground. As the Organization's most

14 A paper with the results of the round tables in Vienna was circulated under the title *A Stronger OSCE for a Secure Europe. Further Strengthening OSCE Capabilities and Capacities across the Conflict Cycle. Report by the German OSCE Chairmanship 2016 to the Ministerial Council*, MC.GAL/5/16, 8 December 2016, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/287431>.

15 For details, see the world map of *Peace Operations 2016/17* produced by the German Centre for International Peace Operations (ZIF), at: http://www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/ZIF_World_Map_Peace_Operations.pdf.

recent and largest mission, the SMM to Ukraine set new benchmarks not only in terms of its 800 observers from 46 participating States. Together with the OSCE Observer Mission at the Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, the SMM exercises a mandate in Ukraine that is broad in terms of both issues and geographical reach. Under the Minsk Agreements, this mandate covers not only monitoring and verifying the ceasefire and withdrawal of weapons in the Donbas, but also many other elements of civil conflict management. As the violence in eastern Ukraine escalated during 2014, local communication broke down, and the political divide on the ground grew ever worse, the facilitation of dialogue in the conflict regions in eastern Ukraine developed into one of the mission's core competencies.¹⁶ The oft-cited eyes and ears of the international community in Ukraine have thereby temporarily assumed responsibility for central tasks in the field where early warning and early action meet.

With its many field presences in the broader European area, and particularly in regions with a comparatively low level of integration in multilateral systems, the OSCE is one of the most important actors in the international community. Many of its operations, e.g. in the western Balkans or Transnistria, have decades of experience and can make use of extensive networks of local contacts at all levels. The benefits of this local presence creates enormous potential for leveraging knowledge and practical resources on the ground and translating them into information on political, economic, and civil society developments for the OSCE's early-warning system. Alongside the major peace missions in Ukraine and Kosovo, this is particularly relevant to the presences in Central Asia, where the OSCE is one of the few organizations supporting international engagement in a region that is largely ignored by the international community. The benefits for the Organization from co-operation with local actors have been particularly clear in recent years in relation to the OSCE's two largest field presences in the region, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) and the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, in terms of generating new knowledge and practices for early warning and early action that are applicable to other field presences.

In reaction to the escalation of the conflict between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in south-western Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, the OSCE Centre in Bishkek worked closely with civil-society actors in the region, and in consultation with local decision makers, to develop the *Peace Messengers* project.¹⁷ With

16 Cf. *Kompleks mer po vypolneniyu Minskikh soglasheny* [Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements], signed in Minsk on 12 February 2015, at: <http://www.osce.org/cio/140156>. For an English translation, see: <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/ukraine/201881/dokumentation-das-minsker-abkommen-vom-12-februar-2015>.

17 Cf. the report by the Federal Foreign Office and Initiative Mediation Support Deutschland (IMSD) on the conference held on 6 July 2016 by the 2016 German OSCE Chairmanship on "The OSCE as Mediator: Instruments – Challenges – Potentials", pp. 16-18, at: http://www.friedensmediation-deutschland.de/fileadmin/uploads/friedensmediation/dokumente/AA-IMSD_Conference_Report_2016_The_OSCE_as_Mediator.pdf.

the participation at times of more than 700 “peace messengers” from all kinds of social milieus and local ethnic groups, this project aimed at creating local formats for dialogue and discussion that would contribute to reducing ethnic tensions and building confidence in the Osh region in the long term. One of the great strengths of this approach was the deliberate and systematic involvement of networks of local actors in the mission’s overall strategy, including councils of elders, eminent persons, and social and religious leaders. Especially in areas where statehood is limited and governments do not exercise power over large parts of their territory, as is true to this day of parts of not just Kyrgyzstan, but also Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, “insider mediators” – i.e. local mediators and dialogue facilitators – can make a significant contribution to the OSCE field operations’ efforts to support peace, compensating at times for the lack of formal mediation channels.¹⁸ The benefits of this “peace dividend” can be seen in several different areas: First, the project enables the OSCE to access a broad information network and local early-warning information. Second, the peace messengers can be the locus for initiating proactive conflict de-escalation measures and act, in many cases, as local mediators themselves, for instance, in peacefully resolving a hostage situation involving Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the province of Chuy.¹⁹ Third, and finally, as part of the co-operation between local authorities, executive organs, and civil-society actors in Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE supported the establishment of contacts between previously divided population groups, some of which remain active long after the project’s conclusion. Not least because of these and other positive experiences, the project, despite its relatively short four-year duration, is considered a milestone among initiatives for peace consolidation in Central Asia.

Though on a smaller scale, the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, under the leadership of the Swiss diplomat Ambassador Markus Müller, also amassed positive experiences in dialogue with local executive and civil society structures. In contrast with the broad scope of the peace messengers project in Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE’s presence in Tajikistan mostly made use of local actors in its field offices from Garm to Shaartuz in order to gather early-warning information in specific situations and develop joint measures for early intervention in consultation with local partners. As in the case of Kyrgyzstan, the extreme weakness of the state’s power outside Dushanbe means that the practice of relying on the local de facto authorities and their knowledge of contexts and conflicts proved to be vital for carrying out targeted conflict prevention and crisis management measures, as in recent Uzbek-Tajik conflicts over frontiers and resources. The OSCE’s experiences in

18 For an analysis of the role of “insider mediators” from a practical perspective, see: Simon Mason/Oliver Wils, *Insider Mediators: Exploring Their Key Role in Informal Peace Processes*, Berlin 2009 [“Berghof Foundation report”].

19 Cf. Mir Mubashir/Engjellushe Morina/Luxshi Vimalarajah, *OSCE support to Insider Mediation: Strengthening mediation capacities, networking and complementarity*, s.l. 2016, pp. 54-55, at. <http://www.osce.org/support-to-insider-mediation>.

Central Asia are by no means unique. The Organization's field presences in the western Balkans have also noted the benefits of local intermediaries as sources of theoretical and practical knowledge, at least in their post-conflict work – particularly as mediators between religious groups.

The initiatives and practices of the field presences in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are examples of context-dependent understanding of conflict prevention in the tense field of early warning and early, mediative action. This approach is promising and valuable for other situations in the OSCE area precisely because it provides the Organization with new means to gather early-warning information in areas of limited statehood and to apply them for timely conflict analysis. At the same time, it enables the field operations, and the Organization as a whole, to make use of regional civil society structures and communication networks to undertake measures in the early stages of the conflict cycle. The major obstacle to applying this approach in other regions within the OSCE area has less to do with the practical adaptation itself but is more a problem of knowledge management. Although early warning and early action have been among the OSCE's core competencies since the early 2000s,²⁰ and key OSCE documents have been able to draw on institutional knowledge gathered since then, knowledge concerning the existence and practicability of such approaches often stands or falls together with the personnel management of OSCE field offices or the organizational strengths and networking of the field operations. As demonstrated above, the sharing of knowledge and practical resources among Vienna and the field operations is often particularly vital for the Organization. Closing this gap and thus raising the Organization's ability to translate early warning into early action in the field of conflict prevention was one of the CPC's guiding thoughts in the development of the early-warning network.²¹ The interlinking of early-warning focal points is thus one of the key means of strengthening problem-oriented skills and capacities in gathering and analyzing early-warning information, developing timely options for action, and ultimately taking appropriate measures.

Conclusions

Conflict prevention and the timely civil management of crises and conflicts have been part of the OSCE's core activities since the early 1990s. A review of recent developments has shown that the growing social, political, and eth-

20 Cf. Alice Ackermann, OSCE Mechanisms and Procedures Related to Early Warning, Conflict Prevention, and Crisis Management, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2009*, Baden-Baden 2010, pp. 223-231.

21 Berghof Foundation report, commissioned by the German Chairmanship and the OSCE (cited above, Note 18) represents one of the first attempts to collate the OSCE's experience of working with "inside mediators" for purposes of knowledge management.

nic complexity of conflicts, particularly in transnational spaces, are posing serious challenges to early warning and early action. Like many other regional security organizations, the OSCE is confronted with the challenge of adapting both its strategic political orientation and its operational instruments to a changing environment. The ever-present danger of escalation in eastern Ukraine, regular cross-border incidents and political tensions in the protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus and Transdniestria, not to mention the growing political divisions in Central Asia illustrate how much the need for preventive early warning and early action in areas such as de-escalation through dialogue facilitation and mediation support has grown.

For all that the OSCE can point to an impressive list of achievements in implementing the groundbreaking conflict prevention measures of Ministerial Council Decision No. 3/11, this contribution has shown that there is still room for new initiatives and improvements.²² The interlinking of the early-warning focal points, by means of which the Secretariat and the CPC have opened the way towards a higher degree of integration of competencies within the OSCE, could make still more use of existing knowledge and practical resources in the field to enhance the effectiveness of the transfer of knowledge and analysis. The experiences of the OSCE's field presences in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan show that the Organization is capable of involving local civil society actors in its operational activities, and thereby gaining insights into and access to developing trends beyond the sphere of its co-operation with state authorities. This dynamic understanding of co-operation in the area of early warning and early action at the local level not only helps to minimize friction between the various processes but may be the very factor that enables preventive action in areas where state power is limited. Such experiences with local actors should be taken into consideration in the planning and restructuring of OSCE field activities more strongly and systematically than has been the case so far to generate added value for other crisis and conflict areas. Such networks could be especially useful for generating new ideas for early-action scenarios for needs assessment and fact-finding in the field. Insider mediators can assist, directly or indirectly, by providing knowledge or practical experience that can strengthen the roots of OSCE conflict prevention activities in realities on the ground. One recommendation to forthcoming chairmanships is that they should examine opportunities for establishing a complementary network of local early-warning focal points and mediators whose capabilities should be carefully recorded and verified so that they can be brought in to enhance existing OSCE networks at strategy meetings or briefings as required. There are plenty of points of connection that could provide a basis for initiatives of this kind, such as the former peace messengers

22 A report by the Secretary General on the implementation processes that have so far been carried out and those that are still in progress was circulated as document SEC.GAL/133/16. It shows that the majority of the plans contained in Ministerial Decision 3/11 are in an advanced stage of implementation.

in Kyrgyzstan or the Central Asian Youth Network (CAYN). The first step – making a record of available resources – already began with the study on the potential of insider mediators commissioned by the CPC in 2016.

Despite improvements in the OSCE's ability to analyse and evaluate early-warning information, enhanced linkage of focal points, and the development of new early-action measures, the OSCE will not be able to call upon its full potential for conflict prevention as long as operational activities are not complemented by an adequate understanding of the problems that exist and a willingness to take political action. This contribution has demonstrated that the OSCE's impact in every phase of the conflict cycle depends critically upon the readiness of the participating States to see the OSCE as more than a first aid kit for emergencies. At the same time, phenomena such as the protracted conflicts in the OSCE area reveal the negative effects of a lack of political will to act on the part of the participating States, particularly of those states that are, to some degree or other, themselves involved in those conflicts. However, a lack of political will or a failure to reach consensus on questions of conflict prevention or conflict resolution should not be wrongly considered an indicator of political (in)action. Precisely against this background, a constructive foreign policy, one oriented towards multilateralism and dialogue, needs to be evaluated in terms of its desire to see and its ability to achieve consensus as a product of long-term dialectical exchange in a dialogue based on norms and guided by interests. If this is not the case, platforms like the OSCE can become the victim of a fatalistic circular reasoning in which the lack of political will on the part of the participating States is taken as an argument for bypassing multilateral policymaking, thereby missing the opportunity to pursue vitally necessary initiatives.

This is especially true in the area of conflict prevention, whose status has always been problematic in any case, given the difficulty in proving results. Alongside the further development of operational options, such as the direct involvement of insider mediators and the increased use of the knowledge such actors possess to encourage the strengthening and development of OSCE capabilities both in the field and in Vienna, the central challenge here is to prevent the structured dialogue process between the participating States – including dialogue on key issues of conflict management – from being ripped up. To this end, the OSCE's role in civil conflict management should be reinforced on a longer timeframe than that of a single Chairmanship by means of close co-ordination within the Troika. Small steps such as the strengthening of the Secretary General's early-warning function in the Permanent Council, the promotion of complementary measures such as informal high- and working-level discussion formats, and closer co-operation between the Chairmanship and the Secretariat in bilateral preparatory sessions could already show the line of attack that needs to be taken. Prior to the Ukraine crisis, there was a failure to take decisive steps towards reform, largely because of a lack of political interest on the part of many participating

States and a general neglect of OSCE platforms. Even if the crisis of trust in the OSCE area should continue in the years to come, the foundations for answering (political and strategic) questions in the period that will follow the crisis are already being laid now. The participating States, and above all the states holding the Chairmanship, cannot allow the opportunity that this presents to unfold without adequate preparation.