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The OSCE Mission to Skopje: Advancing Mandate Priorities through Partnerships and Innovation

Introduction

In this paper, we present three angles on the work of the OSCE Mission to Skopje that we have selected to highlight specific dynamics and lessons learned. First, we look at how certain OSCE projects can have major positive spillover effects beyond the immediate scope of the activities implemented. We also briefly examine how partnerships created in the framework of a programmatic activity can serve as vehicles for the implementation of projects from other portfolios, becoming what we call “soft infrastructure”. Second, we present a concrete example of how mission activities can use new technologies to support the fight against hate crime and hate speech. Third, we look at how analytical tools developed in-house can complement a more established monitoring methodology to strengthen early-warning capabilities. Finally, we consider some of the main challenges and constraints faced by the Mission during the past year, a period of protracted political uncertainty.

Background

Since its launch, the work of the OSCE Mission to Skopje has evolved in constant partnership with the national authorities. As the situation on the ground has changed and events have unfolded, new challenges have emerged. To meet them, the tasks assigned to the Mission have also evolved throughout the years, as has its structure.

The initial OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje was established in September 1992 as a small international presence, tasked with monitoring developments along the country’s northern border, promoting the maintenance of peace, and preventing conflict. Subsequent decisions of the OSCE Permanent Council assigned further tasks, which included establishing ongoing political dialogue with the host government. In 1998, as the Kosovo conflict was unfolding, additional resources were allocated to the Mission to enhance border monitoring and prevent crisis spillover. During the 2001 inter-ethnic conflict in the country and, in the aftermath of the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) by the conflict parties in August, the Mission progressively enlarged the scope of its monitoring to the overall security situation in the country. The main focus continued to be maintaining peace and stability, with the additional priority of supporting the implementation of the OFA. The expanding set of tasks entrusted to the mission in-

cluded monitoring the humanitarian situation and returns and organizing confidence-building activities between the police and local communities. It also started to engage in police reform, deploying advisers both on the ground and in the police academy. In just one year, the strength of the Mission increased from 26 to over 200 staff and several field offices were established, including in Tetovo, Kumanovo, Gostivar, Kičevo, and Struga. In the subsequent years, while the Mission continued to maintain monitoring and early-warning functions, it also began to run programmatic activities, which increasingly became central to the work of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, as it was renamed in 2010. Mission-led projects supported host-country reform efforts in a wide array of OFA-relevant policy areas, such as equitable representation in the public administration, decentralization, education, and the use of languages.

Currently, the Mission pursues three key priorities. First, we continue to support the implementation of the OFA and promote social cohesion. Second, we design and implement projects to advance constructive inter-ethnic relations. Third, we continue to maintain the only international monitoring capability in the country, analysing the security situation for early-warning, early action and mediation purposes. The Mission implements its activities via two departments: The first covers the human dimension portfolio, including good governance, social cohesion, and the rule of law, while the second is in charge of police capacity-building activities and monitoring the security situation. The majority of our staff is based at Mission headquarters in Skopje, while a number of advisers are co-located in the premises of the police academy and in a small number of police stations. We also maintain a field station in Tetovo, as well as mobile monitoring teams. The Mission strength is 151 staff, of which 109 are locally contracted and 42 are internationals. Our annual budget is about six and a half million euros.

Positive Project Spillovers and Partnerships as “Soft Infrastructure”

The “Building Bridges” project offers grants to municipalities, students, teachers, parents, and schools to organize joint activities involving students who belong to different communities and speak different languages. The fund is a joint effort by the OSCE Mission, the Ministry of Education and Science, and the American, Dutch, Irish, and Swiss governments. Since its launch in 2014, over 100 schools and more than 3,000 students from different ethnic communities have taken part in joint activities financed via Building Bridges grants. For many of the participating children and students, these activities were a unique chance to interact with children from other communities, as the vast majority of students attend entirely homogeneous schools where classes are taught in only one language. Examples of activities funded by Building Bridges include: creating arts and crafts halls in primary schools; organizing municipal cultural events, research projects, and music classes; designing

“tourist guides” for children and undertaking joint visits with partner schools; constructing educational parks or other facilities; supporting joint vocational training; and creating blogs, websites, and newsletters. Since its inception, Building Bridges has been a fundamental part of the Mission’s efforts to advance inter-ethnic relations, and it has borne considerable fruit.

Besides the considerable impact on intercommunal and inter-ethnic relations generated by the funded activities, we also look at Building Bridges as a useful case study to analyse how positive project spillover effects may also be major achievements in their own right. The main positive spillover of Building Bridges was to identify an existing demand by communities for inter-ethnic activities and integrated education. The success of and enthusiastic participation in activities funded by Building Bridges contributed to dispelling the myth that inter-ethnic activities in schools were unwanted by recipients or difficult to implement. Starting from this positive experience and facing growing demand, the Ministry of Education and Science decided in 2016 to launch its own programme to fund joint inter-ethnic activities to support integrated education.

A second positive spillover effect with long term benefits was to strengthen the ability of applicants to access grants. Building Bridges operates according to a project cycle, and applicants can apply for “regular grants” by March, May, or October every year. Smaller ad hoc initiatives can also be funded at any time via a “rapid grant” procedure. The Building Bridges Advisory Board, consisting of representatives of donors and the Ministry of Education and Science, awards grants to the winning projects. Since 2014, the Board has examined more than 370 applications and financed 56 activities. By applying for Building Bridges grants, partner schools, municipalities, and parents have familiarized themselves with the skills needed to write project proposals and respond to calls. For many partners, especially schools, these were the first project proposals they had ever prepared. As project management skills have been refined over the past three years, Building Bridges partner schools are now more likely to receive funding from other initiatives than are other schools. For example, twelve out of 49 primary schools and six out of 14 secondary schools that received funding from the Ministry of Education and Science for integrated education activities last year had previously been awarded Building Bridges funds.

The third development we observe in another case study shows how strong and lasting partnerships created for one initiative can pave the way for further joint activities with the same partners in different areas – sometimes delicate ones. The *Safe Schools* project has supported the creation of informal discussion groups in schools on issues pertaining to safety in education since 2012. Building upon the success of the original initiatives, the Mission expanded this project to establish working groups on Safe Schools in 26 partner schools across six municipalities. The project culminated with the creation of municipal level working groups, comprising students, teachers, municipal of-

ficials, local police, social services, and parents. The municipal working groups on Safe Schools meet regularly to tackle a broader and more comprehensive range of issues linked to security in education. For example, they examine standard operating procedures for school evacuation, review access and safety measures, or mediate conflicts among pupils or classes. The Mission supports the work of these municipal working groups by providing training and expertise. Over the years, and thanks to the dedication of both our counterparts and our staff, a strong and lasting partnership has been created between the Mission and numerous municipalities, schools, teachers, and students engaged in Safe Schools. This co-operation has enabled the Mission to plan and launch additional activities together with Safe Schools participants, using the established partnership as what we could call “soft infrastructure”. Last year, for instance, we supported the launch of mediation activities in our partner schools. Mission experts trained an initial group of trainers, who then passed on their knowledge to mediators – both teachers and students – in each participating school. This led to the creation of mediation clubs, readily accessible in each of the 26 partner schools, which offer peer-to-peer mediation to those in need of support in cases of conflict. Mediation is confidential and limited to cases that do not have criminal relevance. Mediators assist in resolving conflict situations, as well as defusing potential conflicts, such as fights between pupils or classes from different schools, including conflicts initiated on or wholly taking place on social media. For 2018, the Mission is devising a soft-approach programme with Safe Schools partners to gradually introduce activities relating to countering violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism (VERLT). We are currently planning activities and training for teachers to assist them in recognizing early signs of violent extremism, radicalization, and vulnerability among students, as well as projects to increase the resilience of local communities, promoting a deeper understanding of this complex and dangerous phenomenon. At the same time, the Mission will continue to support the preparation of a national strategy for countering violent extremism, applying a cross-dimensional approach to assist authorities in tackling this emerging challenge. Introducing pilot activities tackling this delicate topic will be challenging and its success will only be possible thanks to the solid “soft infrastructure” created by Safe Schools.

New Technologies to Respond to Hate Crime and Hate Speech

The phenomenon of hate crimes has been a growing focus of OSCE activities since December 2003, when the Maastricht Ministerial Council stressed the

danger they pose and committed to a collective effort to fight them.¹ Subsequently, the participating States agreed to “consider enacting or strengthening, where appropriate, legislation that prohibits discrimination based on, or incitement to hate crimes motivated by, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.² Hate crimes were recognized as a major threat to the security of individuals and the group they belong to, with a potential to jeopardize social cohesion and inter-ethnic relations. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) defines hate crimes as “criminal acts motivated by bias or prejudice towards particular groups of people. To be considered a hate crime, the offence must meet two criteria: First, the act must constitute an offence under criminal law; second, the act must have been motivated by bias.”³

The OSCE Mission to Skopje is engaged in combating hate speech and hate crime in the field. We will examine in particular how new technologies can assist in tackling the challenge posed by hate crimes, and complement more established efforts, such as human rights monitoring and legislative support. An initial example is how technologies can effectively bridge gaps in data collection. In 2013, the Mission created the first registry for hate crimes monitoring in the country, in partnership with the national Helsinki Committee. The registry was designed as a web platform to map hate crime incidents country-wide, and to collect relevant data. Over 350 incidents have been registered since 2013 via the www.zlostorstvaodomraza.mk domain, allowing rule-of-law institutions, decision makers, and the public at large to report hate crimes and access relevant data. The platform also provides real-time statistics on hate crimes, and analysis of this data is used to support capacity-building efforts by the Mission, implementing partners, and authorities. For example, during the peak of the mixed migration flow in 2015, data analysed via the registry flagged a surge of hate crimes targeting migrants, and surveys indicated that both perpetrators and victims of hate crimes were mostly young. This knowledge enabled a more targeted response to hate crimes and signalled the need to address hate crimes among youth as a priority.

In addition to the web-based registry, the Mission has, over time, focused its efforts in three main directions to produce effective, sustainable re-

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- 1 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Maastricht 2003, *Decision No. 4/03, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*, MC.DEC/4/03, 2 December 2003, at: <http://www.osce.org/mc/19382>.
 - 2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Permanent Council, *Decision No. 621, Tolerance and the Fight Against Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination*, PC.DEC/621, 29 July 2004, in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Ministerial Council, Sofia 2014, *Decision No. 12/04, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*, MC.DEC/12/04, 7 December 2004, Annex, pp. 3-5, here: p. 3, at: <http://www.osce.org/mc/23133>.
 - 3 OSCE ODIHR, Hate Crime Reporting, *Criminal offence + Bias motivation = Hate Crime*, at: <http://hatecrime.osce.org/what-hate-crime>.

sults with the aim of diminishing the number of hate crime incidents. The first priority area has been capacity-building, where we worked with the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors, the Ministries of Justice and the Interior, the Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Agency for Youth and Sports, the Directorate for Data Protection, and civil society organizations to enhance their understanding of hate crime offences and their ability to deal with them. For the first time, the Mission and ODIHR formed a partnership to provide specialized training to 200 high-ranking police officers on how to identify hate crimes and strengthen the structure of law enforcement agencies to combat them. Special forms for recording hate crimes were created and focal points were established within the relevant institutions.

Our second priority has been raising awareness and deconstructing prejudice to improve inter-ethnic relations and promote tolerance and non-discrimination. To address this challenge, we sought to couple established capacity-building and advocacy activities with the possibilities offered by modern technology. In the case of the former, we published brochures, guides, and training materials for legal practitioners and civil society and organized numerous conferences, workshops, and round-tables to address the challenge of hate crimes. Together with our implementing partners, we also designed reforms needed to ensure proper procedures in dealing with hate crime perpetrators and victims, such as distinguishing between regular offences and hate crimes. At the same time, we explored possibilities offered by new information technology to frame a tailored approach towards young people. The Mission's plan here was to engage young people as agents of change in their own environment, as we had identified this group as particularly vulnerable to hate speech, stereotypes, and biases – all conditions that can further lead to hate crime incidents. In partnership with the French Embassy in Skopje, we created a mobile application for reporting online hate speech.⁴ By using this app, users can flag websites, articles, social media posts, or videos as inciting hate crimes or hate speech. Our app was particularly well-received by young users, who are more open to solutions based on technology.

Finally, the Mission and its partners dedicated solid efforts to strengthen the existing legal framework in the country, provide free legal aid to victims of hate crime, and advance policies that cover all aspects of hate crime offences, from prevention to prosecution. Prosecuting hate crimes in the host country remains a challenge, partly because the recording of hate crime offences has not been fully systematized, and partly due to the lack of specific provisions in the Criminal Code. To tackle this challenge, the Mission supported the formation of a working group to amend the Criminal Code. While discussion of this in parliament has been delayed by the political circumstances, the Mission continues to advocate for adopting the proposed

4 The application can be downloaded on <http://nemrazi.mk/app>.

amendments, which it hopes will mark a turning point by engaging all relevant actors in taking a comprehensive approach to deal with hate crime.

For the forthcoming year, we are planning a set of activities that will further advance the Mission's efforts to combat hate speech and hate crime. First, we will continue our close co-operation with ODIHR, as the OSCE institution designated to provide guidelines on dealing with this topic. Together, we aim to continue and broaden the provision of training on hate crime-related offences for police officers, prosecutors, and other legal practitioners. Second, we plan to conduct a nation-wide victimization survey, reaching out to all communities and trying to establish where hate crimes and hate speech were not reported to police. This will allow us to assist the national authorities in establishing the magnitude of under-reporting. Finally, we will continue working with the government, parliament, and civil society to enhance the existing legislative framework to meet the highest standards, fostering social inclusion and trust in the criminal justice system.

Introducing Innovative Means to Reinforce Monitoring and Reporting

As emphasized at the start of this contribution, monitoring and reporting, with a particular focus on the security situation, have been priority tasks since the launch of the first OSCE mission to Skopje. To date, we continue to carry out this fundamental activity along three main axes to underpin the Mission's early-warning functions. First, we maintain the only international security-monitoring capability in the country. Our monitors engage with representatives of the political, cultural, and business communities and observe local developments to identify a potential for increased tensions, paying particular attention to inter-ethnic relations. Second, we liaise with political parties at local and national level and look closely at how the balance of power is shifting in parliament. This enables the Mission to report on political developments in a balanced, timely, and accurate manner, as well as to maintain continuous contact with relevant political actors across the spectrum. Third, we monitor high-profile cases that might have an impact on the security situation or inter-ethnic relations: In 2016 alone, we directly monitored over 100 trial sessions and supported the work of our implementing partners in observing another 450. Our rule-of-law officers observe the proper implementation of criminal code provisions and fair trial guarantees during court proceedings, and report to the participating States. Over the years, trial monitoring has allowed us to identify a number of areas where further support is required to ensure practical implementation of fair trial guarantees.

Such monitoring and reporting activities are mainly performed with the help of an established methodology common to many OSCE field operations. Our monitors observe an event and describe it in a report. This document is first verified and analysed by our units, and then the information it contains

enters our regular reporting cycle. The information is circulated first at mission level and then, after further analysis, the most important developments make it into our official reports to participating States and OSCE institutions and structures. At times, major events warrant a fast response in the form of a spot report or specific issues are analysed upon request of the OSCE Chairmanship. While this methodology is solid and continues to be the backbone of our monitoring efforts, in 2015, the Mission started to develop an in-house analytical tool to further strengthen our early-warning capabilities. Building upon years of lessons learned in monitoring and reporting, we developed this tool to assist us in identifying early signs of tension, especially in the period midway between elections. Our goal was to complement our traditional monitoring capability with a more refined analytical instrument. It relies on indicator-based monitoring for early identification of segments of society vulnerable to potential incidents. It also draws on previous experience to track behavioural and other patterns that could be indicators of potential trouble. This allows it to flag both potentially vulnerable groups and hotspots where tensions appear more likely to increase or violence to break out. This tool does not replace human expertise in assessing the impact of specific events on a certain group (for example, statements inciting ethnic strife), nor does it seek to formulate predictions. Yet it complements our staff's invaluable skills with a solid, data-driven analytical platform to assist us in discharging the Mission's early-warning mandate.

In practical terms, our monitors have developed a set of 75 indicators of possible tensions, such as the use of hate speech during protests or reports of intimidation. When talking to local contacts or observing events, our monitors look out for indicators, which they highlight in their reports. After verification, while the reports are channelled into the Mission's reporting system as described above, the indicators are elaborated and entered in a database. Depending on the issue, indicators can either be recorded as a single instance or our monitors can assign them a value, attaching a qualitative assessment to the event. The system then uses past information to determine whether further data is necessary to evaluate the likelihood of tensions rising in a specific area or around a specific topic. Finally, it aggregates data about isolated incidents to flag cases where a potential pattern of tensions might be emerging. This helps the mission management to decide whether to increase monitoring in a certain area or on a certain issue, and ultimately whether to give an early-warning notice about potential rising tensions.

A Flexible Approach to Meet Challenges and Seize Opportunities

Our host country has faced major political challenges over the past year and a half, with two interim governments being followed by early parliamentary elections in December 2016. The focus on these issues, as well as the turn-

over in personnel at the relevant ministries, limited the authorities' ability to implement reforms. Tensions rose and culminated with the attack on parliament on 27 April 2017, after which the political climate steadily improved. A peaceful transition of power followed, and the new government formed on 31 May launched a reform agenda.

This volatile political situation inevitably affected the Mission's operational environment. Changes of partners caused delays in the design and implementation of a number of national work programmes and strategies, and draft legislation in key areas did not advance as planned. For the OSCE Mission to Skopje, this created both challenges and opportunities. Throughout this period, the Mission maintained a flexible approach within the remits of its mandate, seeking to continue its longer-term efforts, while simultaneously allowing sufficient room for manoeuvre to respond to new challenges linked with the political crisis.

In some cases, circumstances related to the operational environment constrained the implementation of Mission activities in a particular field. For example, in 2015 a new legal framework for reforming the public administration was adopted with significant support from the Mission. It included both a functional review of the public administration and provisions to ensure equitable representation of communities and merit-based recruitment. The Mission supported local institutions in implementing these reforms through capacity-building, working, for instance, with human resources departments in central and local government to improve their recruitment processes and align them with the new legislation. However, a majority of the new provisions were not fully implemented during 2016 as originally planned. This was mainly due to circumstances outside our control, some of which concerned the political crisis: a protracted electoral period, during which there can, by law, be no recruitment to the public administration; a weak response by central institutions, particularly regarding the provision of equitable representation; and gaps in the training programmes of partner institutions, especially on human resources policies. Faced with such constraints, the Mission decided to postpone activities to support the implementation of the new legal framework. However, we remained committed to supporting the much-needed reforms in the public administration and looked for re-entry points to continue our engagement within the remits of our mandate in a creative fashion. Consequently, our experts undertook a mapping exercise, assessing the status of the implementation of the law and of the existing capacities, together with partner institutions. This ultimately enabled the Mission to present the new government with a clear picture of the progress made and the remaining gaps in the enactment of this key legislation on public administration reform, facilitating both the resumption of implementation and efforts to further improve the existing legal framework.

In other cases, we met the challenges of the operational environment by reinforcing our regular activities. During the daily protests in Skopje in the

first half of 2017, we strengthened our monitoring capability to ensure that the Mission would be able to closely follow this important development at all times. Our monitors covered every daily protest in Skopje for two consecutive months, while continuing to meet regularly with local contacts, party representatives, and civil society organizations. Though this imposed a significant constraint on our staff and resources at times, the information collected and analysed boosted the Mission's reporting capacity, providing the OSCE participating States with timely and relevant information and allowing us to detect situations that could potentially trigger security threats.

Conclusions

Looking back over the past year and a half, we can see how institutional innovation and the flexibility to re-orient activities within the remits of our mandate have been two essential drivers that have allowed our Mission to succeed in a period characterized by both multiple constraints in the operational environment and by political volatility. Looking forward, institutional innovation will perhaps be the pivotal feature of the Mission in the future, as our new programmes, with which we seek to further support the authorities in implementing reforms, take shape. In particular, we have seen how the Mission can succeed in coupling long-standing expertise in specific domains, such as monitoring and reporting, with the possibilities created by new technologies. Furthermore, taking full advantage of the latest IT developments will continue to be crucial, both to match emerging challenges and to extend our reach to younger generations. Creating partnerships and building bridges will also be essential for the Mission's core efforts in promoting social cohesion and improving inter-ethnic relations. We will reach out to new partners to broaden our "soft infrastructure". Together, we will further engage in enhancing the resilience of local communities to the security challenges of our time, such as violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism. Finally, we will continue to evaluate our capacities and expertise against tangible results, to seek areas where we can further improve and new angles to tackle both long-standing challenges and new tasks. We will continue to distil key lessons learned from the Mission's experience and to transfer our expertise and analytical tools for the benefit of our sister OSCE field operations. At the same time, the OSCE Mission to Skopje will continue to find avenues to innovate as a key success factor in pursuing the OSCE's commitment to our host country's citizens.