

‘Ever heard of the OSCE?’ from the Helsinki Monitor

Caption: In an article published in 1999 in the quarterly publication Helsinki Monitor, Walter A. Kemp, Senior Adviser to the High Commissioner on National Minorities of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), outlines the main reasons for the lack of knowledge about the organisation on the part of the general public and the media.

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Ever heard of the OSCE?

Walter A. Kemp

This article examines the reasons behind the Organization's low profile and analyzes the extent to which this is an excuse, a specific strategy or an inherent characteristic.⁽¹⁾ It concludes by asking if and how the OSCE's profile should be raised.

Better known, but still misunderstood

Knowledge concerning the OSCE is increasing. Any search of the Internet, wire services or library catalogues will reveal a significant number of entries on the OSCE. Several recent high profile events like the OSCE's work in Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia, Croatia and Chechnya and its election monitoring activities have put it in the news. Indeed, the Kosovo Verification Mission is in the news almost every day and Reuters, for some time, has referred to the OSCE as either 'Europe's watchdog' or 'Europe's leading security organization'. One could argue that for its size, the OSCE is punching above its weight.

But although the name recognition of the OSCE has increased, the work of the Organization on the whole remains relatively unknown and its constituency is limited to political elites, specialist non-governmental organizations and security experts. Even people who have heard of the OSCE are sometimes unsure of what it does. Why is this so?

Many OSCE activities are subtle, multi-faceted and develop over a long period of time. Comprehensive security, by definition, covers a wide spectrum of issues and therefore requires considerable explanation. Terms like 'co-operative security', the 'human dimension', 'the Document-Charter' and other OSCE buzz-words are neither in the normal lexicon nor can they be described in easily digestible soundbites. Developing civil society is like pouring concrete; it is essential for building strong foundations, but it takes time and watching it solidify is rather uneventful. Successful preventive diplomacy is difficult to quantify (in other words, nothing happens when it works) and post-conflict rehabilitation can take years just to achieve 'normalization'. For these reasons, much of what the OSCE does is considered 'unnewsworthy' for a media and public with a relatively short attention span.

Another reason why the OSCE receives little media attention is the fact that most of the areas where it is engaged are of little interest to the average person; until things go horribly wrong. Who had ever heard of Chechnya or Kosovo until a few years ago? How many people understand the complexities of national reconciliation in Tajikistan or the intricacies of the political settlement processes in places like South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transdniestria or Nagorno-Karabakh?

Sadly, crises in some OSCE countries are sometimes regarded by the popular press in the same disinterested way that Neville Chamberlain referred to Germany's annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938; 'a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'.

Another contributing factor to the OSCE's relative obscurity stems from the limited amount of resources it devotes to press and public information. This is partly due to the lack of a coherent strategy as to how the Organization should be promoted and who should do it. Is it, as some participating States suggest, the work of the States and if so how does one ensure unity of identity and approach? Is it the role of the Chairmanship, or would this put added weight on an already over-burdened office? Or is it the work of the Secretariat? Until 1994 there was not a single employee devoted to press and public information. Five years later there is a staff of four: a Spokesperson, Public Information Officer, Press Officer and a secretary who together have a budget of USD 500,000. These Secretariat staff members are supported by press and public information officials in the field (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia in particular). This small operation reflects the desire of the participating States to keep the Organization as lean, effective and unbureaucratic as possible. However, one could argue that such a minimal public relations brass ensemble is too small and ill-equipped to blow the Organization's horn.

Another reason why the OSCE is relatively unknown is that the name of the organization is rather long. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe is a mouthful in any language; 'OSCE' doesn't trip off the tongue like 'NATO' or the 'UN'. Furthermore, people lose the OSCE acronym in the alphabet soup of European security organizations — and many, quite frankly, are simply not interested in security issues. But these characteristics are not unique to the OSCE. So how else can one explain the OSCE's low profile?

The single most important consideration is that in many instances the OSCE is not seeking a high profile. In other words, its modesty is a reflection of its organizational culture. Despite the transition from Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization is still very much a negotiating and decision-making forum of states. Although the OSCE now has well-developed institutions and field activities, its political fora maintain the conference culture that the CSCE had in the 1970s and 80s. Unlike parliaments which increasingly have their proceedings televised, the nature of the diplomatic process is such that publicizing sessions of the Permanent Council and/or other OSCE decision-making bodies would change the whole dynamic of their proceedings and erode their co-operative and consensus-building ethos. Indeed, it would force diplomats to hold their substantive discussions behind closed doors (thereby making the Organization even less transparent) and it would reduce the proceedings in the publicly accessible bodies to the mere reading of public statements (thereby reinforcing the Organization's image as a talkshop).

Purposely avoiding the public eye also holds true for other aspects of the OSCE's work. In many of its activities which cover all phases of the conflict cycle — preventive diplomacy, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation — the OSCE stays out of the limelight. This is particularly the case in preventive diplomacy.

Many of the OSCE's activities are designed to avoid creating conflicts or crises; or in other words 'news'. If prevention works, it stops dramatic or 'news-worthy' events from happening. If someone told Humpty Dumpty to get down off the wall at an early stage, nothing would have happened — no nursery rhyme, no work for 'all the king's horses and all the king's men'. If a forest ranger goes through the forest and prevents fires, this is rather uninteresting. But if half of Florida or large swathes of Greek forest burn to the ground, this is news. Preventing crises may not make dramatic headlines — but that's the point.

This approach is particularly evident in the work of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. Confidentiality, which means that the High Commissioner must keep a low profile, is essential to the success of his work. Often parties directly involved in an issue feel they can be more co-operative and forthcoming if they know that the discussions will not be revealed to the outside world. Conversely, parties may make much stronger statements in public than in confidential conversations, feeling that they should be seen to be maintaining a strong position or that they should try to exploit outside attention. This can exacerbate a tenuous situation.

The same discrete approach is used in the conflict in the area being dealt with by the Minsk Conference. The Co-Chairmen of this process, who are seeking to find a political settlement to the crisis in Nagorno-Karabakh, have operated in virtual secrecy for several years in an effort to build trust and confidence among the parties and to slowly consolidate gains which have been made at the negotiating table. The Co-Chairmen are sensitive to the fact that misinterpretation of public pronouncements could risk derailing the fragile peace process.

The same low-key strategy is employed by many OSCE Missions. Because OSCE Missions and other field activities pursue a co-operative approach to security, they seek to work with and maintain the confidence of the Government in whose country they are operating. In most cases, the OSCE, through its mission and other field activities, does not want to overly politicize or sensationalize situations. Negative press coverage of the Missions' activities or criticism by the Mission of the host country's behaviour could cause friction.

Of course there are exceptions where pressure needs to be brought to bear on the host government in order to prod it into living up to its commitments or to follow a course of action favourable to the majority of OSCE states. This is particularly the case in violations of commitments in the human dimension (e.g.

elections, freedom of the media, resettlement of refugees and displaced persons) when public pressure can focus attention and mobilize support against an errant state. Through this approach, states can be brought back into line before the situation becomes worse. The fact that criticisms are seldom made in public means that the use of a public pronouncement (a critical election report, a statement by the Chairman-in-Office or another high-ranking OSCE official, or a publicized remark by a Head of Mission) is in itself a demonstration of the Organization's resolve. Because it is a departure from the usual way that the Organization does business, when it happens the State in question usually takes notice.

For the most part, however, because the OSCE is not a declaratory body that makes decisions and statements condemning the actions of one or another of its participating States, the co-operative approach to security usually results in a soft and constructive line. This tactic has proved successful in many instances. In terms of European security this is a good thing. In terms of publicizing the work of the OSCE, it creates a paradox: the same reasons that make the Organization successful keep it out of the public eye.

One result is that the OSCE is often overlooked when credit is given for success. This would not be so bad if critics did not apply a double-standard when apportioning blame. When there is a success story in which the OSCE has played a significant role, the same observers who are quick to criticize the OSCE for being ineffective vaguely refer to the success of the international community (if they acknowledge the success at all). When there is a failure, it is the OSCE rather than the international community that is to blame. One could call this the Ben Johnson phenomenon. When black Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson beat Carl Lewis and smashed the world record in the 100 metres at the 1988 Olympics he was a Canadian hero. When he was stripped of his medal and banned from competitive athletics for life he was referred to by many (including some Canadian officials!) as a Jamaican immigrant.

Need for an increased profile?

Is there any point in the OSCE blowing its own horn a little louder? Does it need a higher profile?

The simple answer is no. The OSCE is an international organization. It does not need to engage in extensive public relations efforts in order to increase name recognition or public sympathy. It is not a private enterprise — it does not have to sell itself. Its stockholders are its participating States and it is their Organization.

This view, however, begs questions about liberal institutionalism, the relationship between States and the organizations in which they participate, as well as interest aggregation and policy-making. The fact that the OSCE has a low profile, for the reasons explained above, means that the level of public interest and participation in its activities is minimal. The exception is in those countries where the OSCE has direct and frequent contacts with the general population (Albania, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina), but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. Unlike in the 1970s and 80s when the man in the street, particularly in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, was able to identify with the CSCE (as the Helsinki process) the OSCE is not a high profile organization.

But does it matter? On the one hand, one could argue that an Organization that prides itself on the human dimension should reach out to the people who, after all, are the ones directly affected by OSCE decisions and who pay taxes to support the work of their states in organizations like the OSCE. This liberal democratic perspective would also support the strengthening of the role of the Parliamentary Assembly in order to create a stronger bond between the people, their elected parliamentarians and the diplomatic process.

The other side of the argument, a more realpolitikal one, is that the OSCE is a collection of states, or indeed only the framework and parameters for a collection of states who share a common interest or imperative of working towards realizing common principles and commitments. There is no need for raising the profile of this process for its own sake. It serves no purpose. Besides, because of the characteristics already discussed, even if the OSCE was more widely understood, its profile in many activities would still not be very high — and this is one of the secrets of its success. The real work in implementing OSCE principles and commitments rests with the States themselves. The OSCE is only a midwife and/or watchdog in this process.

For those reasons, it is the commitments and principles which need to have a higher profile in participating States, not the Organization itself.

The truth lies somewhere in between. The OSCE is a collection of States, but it is also developing an organizational identity which is more than the sum of its parts. This work does not need to be glamorously packaged and sold, but the public do have a right to know about the OSCE and it is in the Organization's best interests. Besides, like it or not, politicians and diplomats are conscious of, and in some cases driven by, the media. For that reason, wider recognition of the OSCE will generate greater interest among decision-makers and will therefore make it easier for officials dealing with the OSCE to forward their policy and budgetary aims.

Forging an institutional identity

The key, then, is to improve the recognition of, and information about the OSCE. This is already underway. The OSCE is taking a much more proactive approach in informing the press and public. The OSCE website, established in October 1996, has been accessed by over 120,000 people in the last two and a half years and was re-launched earlier this year in a new format. A completely revised and updated edition of the OSCE handbook has recently been published. New fact sheets and background papers have been prepared, a CD-ROM of OSCE documents from 1973 to 1997 was released last year, and improvements have been made to the content and form of the monthly Newsletter. In order to spread the word more widely, efforts are being made to ensure more effective distribution of public information. Other projects under consideration include a map of the OSCE and special events to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in the year 2000.

The OSCE's press profile has risen in recent months with the crisis in Kosovo. But we are also trying to create a better awareness of the whole range of OSCE activities by holding more press briefings, improving the quality and distribution of press releases, taking members of the press to OSCE field activities and on the trips made by high-level OSCE officials, and making events like Ministerials or Summit meetings more 'press friendly'.

All of these press and public information efforts are designed to raise the profile of the OSCE, better establish its institutional identity, and create a better understanding of what the OSCE is and does. The only danger of raising the profile of the OSCE too high is that it could create expectations that can not be fulfilled. The OSCE has its strengths, particularly in preventive diplomacy and promoting the growth of civil society. It is increasingly recognized as doing these well, especially in the countries where it has a presence on the ground. By concentrating on its strengths and telling people about them, it will be able to continue its good work.

It should not be forgotten that institutionally, the OSCE is still very young. One of its strengths is that it is flexible, and therefore constantly changing. For that reason, the Organization's identity is still (and some might say constantly) taking shape. As the OSCE's organizational identity evolves, both by responding to daily challenges and by defining its structures and institutions (through the Document-Charter on European Security and the current process of internal restructuring) the 'idea' of the OSCE is being promoted and its operational potential (and limitations) are being realized. One of the most important side-effects of this evolution is that the OSCE is developing a better sense of itself. The next step is to project that image to the world more effectively.

⁽¹⁾ This article is based on a presentation entitled 'Political Will, Public Relations and the OSCE' given at the panel on 'European Security Options at the Beginning of the 21st Century', Third Pan-European International Relations Conference and Joint Meeting with the International Studies Association, Vienna, 16-19 September, 1998.