



High Commissioner on National Minorities

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"The role of the CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in CSCE conflict prevention"

Address by Max van der Stoep, CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities to the Seminar on "The CSCE as a security tool in Europe: Which role for the CSCE?"

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[I. Introduction]

Mr. Chairman,

Capital invested in conflict prevention is capital well spent. In humanitarian, financial and political terms conflict prevention is much cheaper than peacekeeping or rebuilding societies after a violent conflict. This understanding lies at the basis of the increased role the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the CSCE, is playing in the prevention of conflict and the management of crises. Indeed, to my mind it is in particular here that the CSCE has its special role to play in the evolving European security architecture.

This development also reflects a basic assumption with which I wholeheartedly agree: the assumption that conflict, including ethnic conflict, is not unavoidable but can indeed be prevented. This requires, however, that the necessary efforts are made. Potential sources of conflict need to be identified and analysed with an eye toward their early resolution, and concrete steps must be taken to forestall armed confrontation. If these preventive measures are superseded by a sharpening of the conflict, then an early warning must be given in time for more rigorous conflict

containment to take place.

The central question is of course what happens if the CSCE early warning system does produce a warning, whatever form it may take. Early warning and preventive diplomacy by CSCE instruments can only be as effective as the political response of the participating states. The CSCE states must be prepared to give concrete political and material support to these conflict prevention efforts.

An essential precondition for a timely and effective response would seem to be that the participating states have an open eye for longer-term developments with a view to anticipating future crises, and not just paying attention to already existing crises. Of course alarmism and precipitous actions have to be avoided. But it is never too early for a realistic assessment of worrisome developments. Sometimes such assessment may lead to the conclusion that early and determined action is needed. And the earlier the response, the more manageable the problem, and thus the smaller the cost of the necessary response and the more likely it is that it will be affordable. In some cases, however, it will be required that the international community invest a great deal of capital, and such a test of its resolve and credibility will come sooner rather than later.

In spite of this clear need for early responses, I cannot escape the impression that individual States or the CSCE community as a whole are rather slow in their reactions. I do not for one moment doubt that in the Foreign Ministries the necessary information is available and that competent analysts know to assess it. But do their reports and analyses get the necessary attention at the decision-making levels in time? It is my impression that this is not always the case. Equally, I am not sure that the participating States as a group are always able to come sufficiently quickly to effective decisions. Perhaps we should look at ways to speed up the process of decision-making without, I should stress, undermining the political support which is needed to ensure the effective implementation of decisions.

Mr Chairman,

In the final analysis it is the response by the CSCE community as a whole which determines the success of CSCE efforts at conflict prevention. If we speak about the issue of the follow-up to signals coming from the early warning system, such as the recommendations of the High Commissioner, we are dealing with the final responsibility of the CSCE states as a group for security and stability in Europe.

Undeniably, it is the individual participating states themselves which carry primary responsibility for the transformation

processes on their territory, including the economic one. At the same time international assistance is essential. To a certain extent it is even a political and moral duty to help other CSCE states. It is not enough to monitor developments and admonish states when they are not doing well - a positive commitment is also called for. In addition to being a community of values, the CSCE is also a community of responsibility.

In a recent article in Foreign Affairs, entitled 'A Call for Sacrifice. The Co-Responsibility of the West', Czech President Václav Havel made some very relevant comments with regard to this. Referring to the responsibilities of the West, he wrote the following, and I quote: "I do not think at all that the main role of the democratic West is to solve all the problems of the 'postcommunist world.' Our countries ... must deal with their own immense problems themselves. The 'non-postcommunist West,' however, should not look on as though it were a mere visitor at a zoo or the audience at a horror movie, on edge to know how it will turn out. It should perceive these processes as the very least as something that intrinsically concerns it, and that somehow decides its own fate, that demands its own active involvement and challenges it to make sacrifices in the interests of a bearable future for us all." End of quote.

In my view, Mr. Chairman, these are words which ought not only to inspire our thinking but also, I would say, our actions.

[II. Comprehensive security and conflict prevention]

Mr. Chairman,

Early warning and preventive diplomacy are essential components in an overall strategy for conflict prevention, and the CSCE has developed a whole range of instruments and procedures which are useful in this regard. To prevent conflicts arising out of minority issues, the CSCE has established the post of CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. In December 1992, the CSCE Council at its Stockholm Meeting decided to appoint me as the first CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. The Chairman-in-Office of the Committee of Senior Officials, Ambassador Bruni, and the CSCE Secretary-General, Ambassador Höynck, have already given an authoritative analysis of the overall CSCE framework in which the High Commissioner's activities are to be seen. I therefore feel free to concentrate on what the CSCE High Commissioner can do and has done, after having made some preliminary remarks of a more general nature.

Mr. Chairman,

Importantly, the CSCE's comprehensive concept of security relates peace, security and prosperity directly to the observance of human rights and democratic freedoms and the existence of a market economy. Conflict prevention thus requires that all these aspects be taken into account, involving various time frames. It is therefore useful to distinguish between short- and long-term conflict prevention. Short-term conflict prevention aims at the prevention or containment of an immediate development towards escalation.

The durable prevention of conflict in Europe, however, requires a long-term perspective. It involves building a viable democracy and its institutions, creating confidence between the government and the population, structuring the protection and promotion of human rights, the elimination of all forms of gender or racial discrimination and respect for minorities. It also requires the peaceful transition from a rigid state-commanded economic order to a flexible market-oriented system which increases prosperity while paying due regard to social justice.

These short-term and long-term aspects of conflict prevention should be seen as part of an integrated strategy and indeed in practice they can hardly be separated. Efforts at laying the groundwork for a real democracy are vain if in the meantime tensions escalate into bloody civil war or international conflict. The reluctance or even outright refusal of states to build democracy, create confidence, and protect human rights endangers all short-term conflict prevention activities.

[III. High Commissioner and conflict prevention]

Mr. Chairman,

According to his mandate, the CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities is an instrument of conflict prevention who will provide early warning and, as appropriate, early action at the earliest possible stage in regard to tensions involving national minority issues which have not yet developed beyond an early warning stage.

As High Commissioner, therefore, I have a two-fold mission: first, to try to contain and de-escalate such tensions, and second, to act as a 'tripwire', meaning that I will have to alert the CSCE whenever such tensions threaten to develop to a level at which I cannot contain them with the means at my disposal. I should warn the relevant CSCE bodies about escalatory developments, be they slow and gradual or quick and sudden, far enough in advance in order for them to

react timely and effectively. Ideally, however, I should be able to employ preventive diplomacy in such a way that this is not necessary.

It is my conviction that ethnic conflict can indeed be prevented if the necessary efforts are made. Although the ethnic relationships involved often have a centuries-old history, such conflicts very often have more immediate political causes. This becomes especially obvious if one considers that most communities co-exist in relative harmony. Some politicians and other leaders, however, have used the psychological uncertainties and the material scarcities of this transition period as an opportunity for increasing their hold on power. When we realise at an early stage that such sources of tension begin to play a role, we have a better chance of addressing them effectively before they can have a destabilising effect.

Mr. Chairman,

In a general way my mandate elaborates guidelines for determining whether or not I should become involved in a particular situation. I am content to note that my mandate provides me with the necessary freedom of initiative in this regard. Importantly it allows me to operate with the essential amount of independence. The High Commissioner can take a number of steps without consensus being needed. Involvement by the High Commissioner does not require the approval of the CSO or the state concerned. This independence is crucial to the timing of the High Commissioner's involvement for which in most situations would apply the sooner, the better.

I have been able to make use of this independence without, I trust, diluting my final accountability to the CSCE as a whole. I would underline the crucial role of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO). Indeed, within the CSCE framework the CSO has primary responsibility for early warning and preventive action. I feel that my reports to the CSO and in general my contacts and discussions with the CSO and the Permanent Committee in Vienna are essential to the force each other and not work at cross-purposes or be played off against each other.

For example, it would be helpful if the High Commissioner's efforts to influence a certain situation would be strengthened by the fact that the Council of Europe or the United Nations would share his concerns, conclusions and recommendations. In addition, these organisations may have special expertise which could benefit the High Commissioner. I would note here that it is the competence of the Chairman-in-Office to consult and coordinate with the United Nations, the Council of Europe and other relevant international organisations.

The same considerations with regard to coordination and concertation of efforts would seem to apply within the CSCE itself in view of the number and variety of CSCE activities with regard to early warning and preventive diplomacy. Clashes of competences, inadequate flows of information and openly diverging assessments of situations may in fact render these efforts less effective and send the wrong message to the state concerned. Within the CSCE the issue of concertation and coordination may be more easily solved because of the fact that the CSO has primary political responsibility for early warning and preventive action, and its Chairman-in-Office is entrusted with coordinating tasks.

[VI. Conclusion]

Conflict prevention is vital to the future of our continent. I do not think that Europe can afford more of the bloody conflicts that devastate some of her regions. If we do not invest enough now and work in advance we will be presented with a much larger bill in the near future.

I would underline the necessity that interlocking institutions do really interlock so that their efforts are mutually reinforcing, both within the CSCE and between the CSCE and outside organisations. With a view to conflict prevention a concerted effort is needed.