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### Predicting and preventing conflicts: The case of Kyrgyzstan

Against the backdrop of Yugoslavia's violent disintegration, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) responded to the challenge posed by proliferating inter-ethnic conflicts by creating the mandate of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. The role of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) is to prevent conflicts at the earliest possible stage before violence erupts.



This mandate involves the High Commissioner in highly sensitive situations, often affecting the basic national security interests of states. The main guide for selecting cases and deciding on involvement, according to the mandate, is the judgment of the HCNM. When the High Commissioner deems violence inevitable or highly likely, he or she may issue a formal early warning to the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office. The most recent example is Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

Thinking about the case of Kyrgyzstan, what does the twenty-year experience of the OSCE's High Commissioner on National Minorities tell us about the prediction and prevention of inter-ethnic conflicts?

#### Prediction

Early warning implies the ability to predict escalation of conflicts at least with some certainty. This is a challenge because actual triggers that could spark a particular conflict are difficult to identify and predict. Understanding the underlying causes, tensions and dynamics of a conflict prone situation is not only possible but also essential for the job. Conflict analysis is the major part of everyday work. In this work, it is important to distinguish between trends and triggers.

One has to understand and analyze trends that may lead to the escalation of conflict. These trends create conducive environments for minor triggers to ignite violence. For example, a simple brawl in a shop may take on an ethnic dimension and escalate into large-scale inter-ethnic violence when the police are ineffective and perceived to be biased; or when discrimination on an ethnic basis is widespread and when one community feels consistently marginalized.

What are the trends and contextual risk factors that should be taken into account when trying to understand and predict inter-ethnic conflicts? Based on the experience of the HCNM, these risk factors can be divided into three broad categories: grievances, institutions and geopolitics.

### **Grievances**

Grievances stem from systemic discrimination and exclusion, from the non-recognition of identity rights to the inability to speak one's mother tongue or practice one's religion. Such factors, either singly or together, can make people feel like second-class citizens.

An additional factor in some contexts is the pattern of wealth distribution, where minorities are privileged and the majority impoverished. While minorities often are materially less well off, it is not always the case. Sometimes they are better off than majority either due to political privileges or traditional economic activities such as trade or craft. This fact generates resentment among the majority and may make a specific minority a target of popular anger. This fuels the feeling of victimization among the majority who see that in "their" land somebody else is better off.

In Kyrgyzstan, the Soviet legacy fuels such a perception of victimhood among the Kyrgyz. During the Soviet period, the Kyrgyz language was driven out of the public sphere and education system and representatives of minorities or those of a Russian-speaking majority mainly formed the local elite.

Other factors determining and generating grievances among both minority and majority communities can include entrenched prejudice based on stereotypes, myths, and misperceptions, as well as a recent history of conflict or violence and unaddressed questions of justice and reconciliation.

It should be noted, however, that grievances by themselves are rarely an immediate cause of conflicts. It is the politicization of grievances by certain politicians or ethnic entrepreneurs that creates a dangerous situation. Isolation or self-isolation – as, arguably, was the case of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan – can also play a role, making it easier to demonize the whole community and portray it as a threat to the state.

Against this kind of background, rumours and unprofessional media can also become effective triggers. In Kyrgyzstan, rumours spread quickly through text messages and other means. These communications were a powerful mobilizer of the people especially in the countryside and mountainous areas.

Uprisings or ethnic tensions do not necessarily happen when life is utterly intolerable. They happen when a sense of alternative appears and change seems possible. This is why many instances of ethnic conflict are associated with the early stages of democratization. At such moments of transition, old, suppressed grievances come to the fore, but democratic institutions capable of managing and containing them are not yet in place.

In Kyrgyzstan, arguably, a political opening was created by the overthrow of the Bakiev regime in April 2010. At this moment change seemed possible, as the Provisional Government in Bishkek promised to redefine the rules of political game.

### **Institutions**

Institutions include both formal state institutions and informal institutions such as societal groups, networks, elites and so on that define the basic rules of political and public life. Effective state institutions are essential for managing diversity. The state should have effective control of its territory and a monopoly over the use of violence.

Whether a particular society is undergoing an important transition moment and whether it is experiencing processes of democratization after a long period of authoritarian rule also matters. In these kinds of contexts, established rules of participation, the media scene, the education system, and class divisions – especially if they correspond with ethnic ones – are all elements that can make or break peace in a multiethnic environment as informal rules and narratives dominant in the society come under pressure.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, a political crisis resulting from the overthrow of the government in April 2010 created a power vacuum in the South. The state and its institutions were in disarray and could not exercise effective control. As the state failed, the north-south, urban-rural divisions became further pronounced. The failure of effective state control in the South was an important permissive factor that allowed violence to escalate and then made it hard to contain.

Roza Otumbayeva, the head of the Provisional Government, sought international help and support but none was forthcoming. The OSCE is the main international actor in the region; other multilateral institutions were not present on the ground.

Individual states did not find it in their interest to intervene and commit resources to contain the massacre.

## **Geopolitics**

Geopolitical factors are also important in determining outcomes in different conflict prone situations. These factors include, for instance, the neighbourhood in which a particular state is located.

- Is there an active or aggressive kin-state on the other side of the border? The unwillingness of Uzbekistan to engage in the Kyrgyzstan crisis was a major factor in containing the violence and preventing it from developing into a full-blown regional conflict.
- Are there mechanisms for regional cooperation, and are bilateral relations between neighbours good, especially if these states share an interest in one and the same minority group?
- How well represented are international organizations such as the European Union or NATO on the ground, and what influence do they exert?
- What is the role of the dominant regional power or powers?

Inter-ethnic conflicts are often seen as purely domestic ones, but they can have a clear international dimension and thus have consequences for regional stability and security.

## **The importance of context**

These points outlined above are only some of the factors encountered by the HCNM. There may well be others. Not all factors are present in all cases. In different contexts, particular factors prevail and work as primary or secondary causes of conflict; however, in general all three categories of risk – long-standing grievances, failed or transitional institutions and geopolitics – tend to be present in some mix with varied impacts. Hence, it is of vital importance to consider the context of specific approaches to conflict prevention.

## **Prevention**

As part of its conflict prevention work, the HCNM tries to address all three categories of risk factors. The HCNM believes that minimizing grievances – through

the effective protection and promotion of minority rights – is an essential precondition for peace and stability in any multiethnic society. For this reason, the OSCE gives emphasis to minority rights and integration respecting diversity.

At the same time, the HCNM engages in structural prevention, assisting states to improve their legislation, create balanced language policies and integrated education systems and, most importantly, develop institutional mechanisms for better addressing minority needs and interests.

On the geopolitical side, as illustrated by the Bolzano Recommendations, the HCNM understands the international dimension of domestic problems. The HCNM often engages with more than one state when trying to find a sustainable solution to a specific minority issue. This work involves, *inter alia*, facilitating bilateral dialogue and elaborating standards of behaviour pertaining to minorities in inter-state relations as specified in Bolzano.

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### **Knut Vollebæk**

His Excellency Knut Vollebæk has served as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner on National Minorities since 2007. Prior to this post he was Norway's Ambassador to the United States of America (2001-2007) and Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs (1997-2000). As Foreign Minister he served as Chairperson-in-Office of the OSCE in 1999. As a career diplomat, he has served in India, Spain and Zimbabwe and as Norway's Ambassador to the Central American republics, resident in Costa Rica. He holds a M.Sc. from the Norwegian School of Economics and Business Administration and did postgraduate work in Political Science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He holds honorary doctorates from St. Olaf College and Concordia College, USA.

### **OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities**

[www.osce.org/hcnm](http://www.osce.org/hcnm)

### **Bolzano/Bozen Recommendations on National Minorities in Inter-State Relations and Explanatory Note, 2008**

[www.osce.org/hcnm/68722](http://www.osce.org/hcnm/68722)