



OSCEval News is the evaluation newsletter of the Office of Internal Oversight.

Its aim is to provide insights in to the OSCE's work in evaluation, by sharing key evaluation findings and conclusions, as well as new developments regarding the OSCE's overall evaluation culture.

Evaluation is a management tool that contributes to decision-making, strategic planning, and organizational learning.



of OIO and emerging findings.

This edition of OSCEval News is dedicated to

Early Warning in the OSCE: Evaluating Data Collection, Collation and Analysis

The evaluation was conducted by an external expert consultant on behalf of the Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) in 2020/2021.

Introduction

Early warning entails the collection and interpretation of data to alert decision-makers to the escalation, outbreak and resurgence of violent crisis and conflict. It is usually connected to specific actions including silent diplomacy, confidence-building measures and mediation to de-escalate violence and facilitate peaceful resolution. In the OSCE, it is an organization-wide objective, enshrined in declarations and directives such as the 1992 Helsinki Document, the 1994 Budapest Summit Declaration, and the 2011 Ministerial Council Decision 3/11. It consists of practices outlined in documents such as the 2012 Early Warning Guidelines and a compilation of at least 395 early warning indicators. Institutionally, data-related functions are mediated by a wide range of entities including the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), its Situation Room (SitRoom), regional desks of the CPC Policy Support Service (PSS), and Early Warning Focal Points in OSCE Executive Structures.

Early Warning in the OSCE

The primary goal of the OSCE's early warning procedures is to transmit information to inform senior leadership of the Secretariat, first and foremost the Secretary General (SG), as well as the Chair, the Troika and the Permanent Council (PC) as required.

It should be limited to factual insight and action-oriented recommendations. Another goal is to provide situational awareness to Executive Structures.

Organizationally, the CPC's Operations Service (OS) and PSS play a pivotal coordinating role for gathering and processing early warning-related data, and collating and sharing relevant early warning information. The CPC relies on the SitRoom to provide 24/7 alerts and updates across the OSCE area of operations drawing on open-source monitoring of verified media and third-party content providers. Meanwhile, the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) and the OSCE Mission to Skopje are the only field operations with dedicated internal early warning mechanisms that involve data collection, collation and analysis.

Key Evaluation Findings and Conclusions

The OSCE's approach to early warning data collection, collation and analysis is highly decentralized. In keeping with the political and devolved nature of the OSCE, the organization has evolved an array of official and unofficial channels to share and act on early warning-related information. Data collection and information sharing involve formal exchanges using standard reporting templates alongside an array of informal interactions involving phone calls, email and encrypted messaging services. Owing to mandate, resource and political constraints, formal early warnings by senior OSCE leadership are rare and considered a last resort. There is meanwhile a voluminous informal sharing of early warning signals.

The quantity and quality of early warning-related data collection and collation is uneven across the OSCE. Most of the data is qualitative, infrequently standardized, and difficult to subject to statistical analysis. A small number of field operations such as the SMM and the Mission to Skopje issue daily and weekly reports that feature qualitative analysis. Most field operations oversee isolated repositories of potentially useful data from local sources, but for the most part this data is not used systematically. The CPC has taken steps to improve data collection methods and standards, including the development of an open-ended list



of early warning indicators, the creation of a SitRoom database using open-source information, and a combination of seminars, conferences and training opportunities.

Notwithstanding the OSCE's mandate to undertake early warning and the voluminous sharing of information, there is **no sustained formal early warning system across the organization**. What exists is a diverse ecosystem of information collection, sharing and periodic analysis that is responsive to crises when they emerge. This means that most activities are conducted below the radar because of the nature of the organization and the mandates of Executive Structures. Efforts to strengthen the policies and practices of early warning data collection, collation and analysis are thus often "low profile" and "generic" to avoid garnering backlash. In addition, at the field operation level, the extent of engagement in early warning is connected to mandates, the appetite of field operation leadership, available human and material resources, and host country sensitivities. Hesitancy to share sensitive data is widespread across the organization owing to political considerations and the mandates of most field operations. For these and other reasons, the CPC frequently stresses the importance of informal information exchanges.

One attempt to encourage a more coherent and consistent approach to early warning data collection, collation and analysis is the OSCE's updated **open-ended list of early warning indicators**. However, the application of the 395 indicators varies considerably across Executive Structures. The only longitudinal dataset available at the Secretariat level – maintained by the SitRoom – is not used to track early warning signals. At the field level, with some exceptions, there is no regular data collection that can be automatically converted into early warning predictions or forecasts. There is a widespread tendency to avoid formally and explicitly using collected data in that way in fear of political repercussions.

The Way Forward

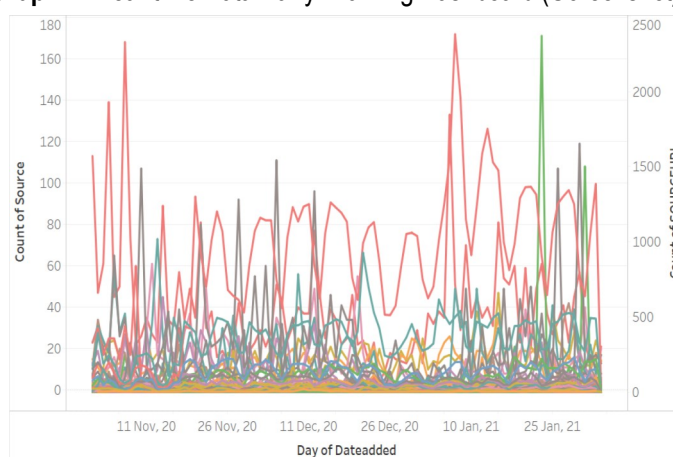
Notwithstanding these challenges, there are several opportunities to enhance early warning in the OSCE. For one, information sharing works reasonably well through informal channels when it matters. Moreover, there is a burgeoning culture of early warning across the organization, including shared understandings of core concepts and priorities by early warning focal points. There is also a lively network of personnel informally sharing a wide range of early warning-related information. These are important assets that have evolved over the course of the past decade. The SitRoom's database

could be better used by early warning actors, and this could be aided by improving the automation of data collection, user-experience and dissemination of its products. Some field operations with relevant mandates are also exploring integrated data fusion capabilities and are prepared to invest in more sophisticated approaches.

Recommendations

- ⇒ **Strengthening CPC's early warning functions, analytical capabilities and institutional memory**, by addressing the mandate and human and material shortages associated with early warning data collection, collation and analysis.
- ⇒ **Better leveraging and enhancing existing assets** for early warning, including the SitRoom, the network of focal points, but also external opensource information capabilities.
- ⇒ **Upgrading data collection software** with special attention to strengthening social media analytics, and supporting the development of a high-quality automated data fusion capability with the SMM and maximizing demonstration effects across the organization.
- ⇒ **Developing a more wide-ranging and nuanced classification system** for "early warning" that expands the range of alerts (and limits the political costs associated with sharing sensitive information).
- ⇒ **Highlighting success stories** to relevant personnel associated with early warning, including cases of averted conflict escalation or resurgence, to demonstrate the benefits of such activities.
- ⇒ **Increasing experimentation with more robust early warning forecasting and predictive modelling**, including in partnership with carefully vetted third parties, with the intention of drawing attention to the dividends of investing in more sophisticated approaches.

Graph 1: Real-time Data Early Warning Dashboard (Screenshot)



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