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The Kazakh Chairmanship and the Future of the OSCE

Ministerial Council in Brussels

Markus Kaim / Andrea Schmitz

Belgium's 2006 OSCE Chairmanship ends with the Ministerial Council on December 4 and 5 in Brussels and is therefore a good opportunity to take stock of the OSCE's activities over the past year—even if the picture is rather grim. The organization's activities in the field of the "human dimension" remain a bone of contention among its members, efforts to resolve conflicts have remained largely unsuccessful, and plans for institutional reform have become bogged down. Above all, Kazakhstan's application for the OSCE chairmanship in 2009 threatens to polarize the organization to such an extent that even the Spanish Chairmanship in 2007 will have little scope for strengthening the organization. Giving the responsibility of leadership to a member state that does not itself really embody the organization's core values exposes questions about the OSCE's credibility and future orientation.

OSCE stagnation continued in 2006, and important reform initiatives that had been discussed in the run-up to the last ministerial meeting in Ljubljana are deadlocked. Consequently, the three tasks that the Belgians regarded as top priorities have remained uncompleted. Firstly, institutional reform has not occurred despite having been on the table since 2005. These proposals include strengthening the position of the OSCE Secretary-General and watering down the consensual decision-making principle. Nor has the organization readjusted the relationship between its three dimensions (human, political-military, and economic-environmental) in a process aimed at

reaching a general understanding about its central tasks. Lastly, the Belgian Chairmanship made only marginal progress toward resolving the "frozen conflicts" over Nagorno-Karabakh and in Moldova and Georgia. In some cases these conflicts—which the OSCE has been attempting to subdue with its long-term missions and its Conflict Prevention Center—have actually worsened.

However, it would be unfair to place the blame for these failings on the OSCE alone. In view of its intergovernmental structure and consensus decision-making, the positions of the 56 member states (or their lack of agreement) are clearly often the reason why the OSCE is so incapable of effectively

fulfilling its assigned tasks. Therefore Freimut Duve, the former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, recently went so far as to call for the organization in its present form to be disbanded.

As in previous years, the OSCE's activities in its "human dimension" were at the heart of the 2006 controversies: Russia and a number of other post-Soviet states continued to criticize the organization's activities in this field as interference in their internal affairs. They objected most of all to the OSCE's election observation missions and activities to strengthen civil society. Thus internal conflict continued to follow the familiar fault lines of previous years. Whereas the United States, Canada, and the states of Europe emphasize the human dimension as a central component of the OSCE and stress that it is precisely the activities in this field that have proven successful, Russia sticks to its critical stance with the support of other post-Soviet states.

Great Expectations: Kazakhstan and the OSCE Chairmanship 2009

One central point on the agenda of the Ministerial Council is the question of the 2009 OSCE chairmanship, where the sole candidate is Kazakhstan. The country would have to be elected unanimously by all member states, but doubts have been raised in some quarters as to its suitability.

Kazakhstan announced its candidacy for the OSCE chairmanship back in spring 2003 in response to the organization's consistent criticism of the slow pace of reform in the country. However, this move made by Rakhat Aliyev (then Kazakhstan's ambassador to Austria, now deputy foreign minister, also son-in-law of President Nursultan Nazarbayev), was based on domestic political calculations: He hoped to repair a reputation tarnished by a string of scandals and recommend himself to the president as a smooth political operator and a potential successor. Since then Kazakh PR strategists have put such energy into the "OSCE Chairmanship 2009" campaign that success has

become a matter of honor for President Nazarbayev and a litmus test for Aliyev's political reputation.

Germany—along with most of the other OSCE member states—endorses the Kazakh application in principle, as German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stressed during his recent Central Asia trip. Supporters argue that the Kazakh chairmanship would have positive repercussions on both the OSCE and the transition process in Kazakhstan. On the one hand, by conferring leadership responsibilities for the first time on a more recent post-Soviet member (Kazakhstan joined the then CSCE in 1992) the OSCE could meet the demand for more participation and partnership. This, supporters say, is a basic precondition for renewing consensus on the principles, goals, and instruments of the organization and is thus indispensable if the erosion of the OSCE is to be stopped and its ability to act restored. Furthermore, they say, a negative vote would bring with it a real danger that Kazakhstan and other CIS states would lose interest in the OSCE and leave the organization altogether.

Moreover, those states that support the Kazakh ambitions assume that the OSCE chairmanship will prove to be an effective incentive for the leadership in Astana to finally implement a reform agenda. Yet, these may be unrealistic assumptions. This agenda has so far failed to progress beyond declarations of intent or move forward with its repeatedly announced democratization of the political system. In the medium term, it is hoped, a decision in Kazakhstan's favor could actually generate a wave of reform that would ripple out across the whole post-Soviet region. At the very least, the supporters anticipate that such a decision would make it easier for particularly troublesome member states like Belarus and Uzbekistan to identify with the goals of the OSCE.

A Controversial Candidate

On the other hand, a number of member states led by the United States and Great Britain, have spoken out against giving Kazakhstan the chairmanship so soon and proposed postponing the candidacy to 2011. They argue that the Kazakh leadership lacks commitment to the values of the organization it intends to lead. They note that the candidate for the OSCE chairmanship is a semi-authoritarian regime that monopolizes the profitable economic sectors of the country it runs, suppresses any meaningful political dissent and generally shows little inclination to establish mechanisms that would allow any effective accountability of those in power. The OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has repeatedly criticized the conduct of elections in the country, most recently during and after the December 2005 presidential elections.

The Kazakh government's response to these accusations is generally to claim that they fail to take into account the special local political culture that produces a "Eurasian" type of democracy distinct from the Western model. The Kazakh political leadership indeed makes no secret of its intention to establish some kind of enlightened authoritarianism and to defend it with vigor. Just a few months before the upcoming vote in Brussels it made changes in the national media law that gravely curb freedom of information in Kazakhstan—a step whose timing was registered with irritation even by the supporters of the Kazakh candidacy. By contrast the reform initiatives that have been proclaimed at regular intervals have to date produced no substantive results. This also applies to the recently established "State Commission on the Development and Concretization of the Program for Democratic Reforms," whose work on improvements to the electoral and media laws has so far lacked any visible results.

In view of this prognosis, it stands to fear that the planned OSCE chairmanship will maneuver Kazakhstan into a dilemma—and

further undermine the OSCE's ability to act. The CIS states, including Kazakhstan, have repeatedly expressed their unhappiness that the work of the OSCE does not meet their needs and interests. Above all, the OSCE activities in the "human dimension" are a thorn in the side of the central Asian elites, who see them as interference in their internal affairs. Instead they would like the organization to shift the focus of its activities more strongly to the security sector, above all the fight against terrorism. In addition, they would prefer the OSCE's political monitoring, especially the election observation missions conducted under the aegis of the ODIHR, to be placed under stronger control by the OSCE's collective organs. However, that would debilitate the functional heart of the OSCE in precisely those areas that define its special status as a pan-European security organization encompassing the post-Soviet states. The OSCE would then be hardly distinguishable from other regional security formats—such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—and thus would be more or less obsolete.

If Kazakhstan wished to satisfy the expectations that are placed on the 2009 chairmanship, it would have to use the office to prevent the normative devaluation of the organization. This would mean that Kazakhstan would have to stand up for the OSCE's standards within its own borders, as well as campaign for them to be applied in the other member states. Yet, so far the political will for that is lacking, as is the required flexibility in the region: Kazakhstan maintains close economic and security ties with its neighbors, and their basically identical domestic political systems and shared interest in regime stability make the governments of the central Asian states heavily dependent on mutual support.

Little Room for Maneuver

In order to mediate successfully between the heterogeneous positions of the OSCE

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states and lead the organization to a new consensus, Kazakhstan would have to emancipate itself from the expectations of its post-Soviet neighbors and actually implement reforms rather than just announcing them. The Kazakh leadership has repeatedly emphasized that such a process requires time and thus indirectly admits that the chairmanship in 2009 would come too early. In view of this, and the currently unbridgeable positions among the member states, the vote in Brussels has been postponed. One conceivable option after the 2006 meeting would be to work toward Kazakhstan delaying its candidacy until a later date. A Kazakh Chairmanship that was in the position of having to externally represent the OSCE's standards without observing them in its own country would damage the organization's credibility and permanently harm the one field where it still has successes to show. Accordingly, Kazakhstan should be offered the prospect of taking the chairmanship in 2011 under the condition that it makes a real start with substantial reforms of its political system and presents a timetable for these.

If the OSCE member states cannot agree to such a compromise, a second option would be to make it absolutely clear to the Kazakh side that a unanimous decision on the 2009 chairmanship will only come about if the country's political leadership uses the coming months to turn its verbal concessions in the field of the OSCE's human dimension into deeds. An immediate reversal of the recent changes to the Kazakh media law would be an absolutely essential first step and a signal that Kazakhstan is willing to meet the standards demanded by the office it seeks. Moreover, the German government should also support the call—already raised by members of the German Bundestag—for a policy agenda for the Kazakh OSCE chairmanship that would give particular weight to the human dimension. Without such provisions the German OSCE policy would run the risk of discrediting its own claims to support democracy and human rights.

During the 2007 Spanish Chairmanship the debate over the Kazakh candidacy should be taken as a crucial opportunity to beef up defense of the OSCE's human dimension against its internal critics and to breathe new life into this traditional core task of the organization.