

Schmitz, Andrea; Richter, Solveig

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Security Dialogue or Talking Shop?

The Corfu Process under Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship

Solveig Richter and Andrea Schmitz

With the Corfu Process, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) wants to regain the key position it was believed to have lost—namely, its role as a forum for broad and inclusive dialogue on security issues from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Yet the challenges are daunting: while the Corfu Process does foster cooperation, it has not yet succeeded in increasing security in Europe. If the basic normative dissent between East and West is not confronted openly but instead just ignored, the risk is high that the process will deteriorate into a trivial discussion group, and that under Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship, it will even undermine the OSCE Acquis. The organisation can only eliminate the deficiencies in the European security architecture if it succeeds in focusing the Corfu Process on a concrete agenda and transforming it into a substantive security dialog.

A sigh of relief was breathed in Athens: after an entire night spent negotiating, the 56 OSCE participating states released a political declaration at the Ministerial Council meeting in December 2009 that officially endorsed the Corfu Process. At an informal meeting of OSCE foreign ministers on the Greek island of Corfu in June of last year, the Greek OSCE Chairmanship launched the process that was to address the ongoing debate on the importance of the OSCE as a security organisation. The discussion was fuelled in June 2008 by the Russian proposal for a new European security architecture. After the conference in Corfu, the Permanent Representatives to the OSCE met on an almost weekly basis at the organisation's headquarters in Vienna

in order to carry out a structured dialogue on substantive issues regarding the future of common security in Europe.

And indeed, the participating states have a large number of issues requiring discussion, since the entire system of cooperative security in Europe is in crisis. This is evident in the declining significance of multilateral organisations. The cause is the obvious disagreement between East and West on the normative and policy foundations of a European security architecture. Controversial points include the future of the EU-Russian Common Neighbourhood and the importance of *soft vs. hard security*. Further evidence of just how fragile cooperation in the OSCE is appeared at the Ministerial Council meeting in Athens, which

nearly collapsed due to irreconcilable differences. Only a few days before the meeting, Russian President Medvedev had proposed a draft Euro-Atlantic security treaty following on his 2008 initiative. Numerous western states saw this as an attempt to undermine the Corfu Process—and thereby end the dialogue in the organisation that was originally created for this purpose. In the end, Russia did agree to sign the Ministerial Declaration, with which the participating states intend to “Reconfirm—Review—Reinvigorate Security and Co-operation from Vancouver to Vladivostok.”

The Corfu Process will continue in the months to come with informal meetings in Vienna. In June, an interim report is to be submitted under Kazakhstan’s OSCE Chairmanship, and decisions are to be made on further action. Whether the Corfu Process really does reinvigorate the OSCE and succeed in improving security for Europe depends crucially on whether it succeeds in utilizing the potential of the process and overcoming its weaknesses.

The potential of the Corfu Process...

The Ministerial Council in Athens gave a major boost to the Corfu Process. Only since the 2002 meeting in Porto have the OSCE participating states been able to once again reach agreement on a political declaration. For the OSCE, which has declined in significance over the last decade as a security policy forum for consensus-building between East and West, this constituted a turning point in many respects. First, in their ministerial declaration on the Corfu Process, the OSCE participating states—and thus both the EU-transatlantic partners and the post-Soviet states—made a commitment to cooperation and to the OSCE Acquis that had been virtually unthinkable in the preceding years. Second, for the first time, they recognised in a common political declaration that there are deficiencies in the European security architecture and that there is a need for cooperation over key aspects.

This applies to unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts, conventional arms control, and the application of a comprehensive security concept. Third, the participating states emphasised that the crisis can only be overcome based on OSCE principles regarding the three dimensions of security—the politico-military dimension, the economic-environmental dimension, and the human dimension—and only through multilateral cooperation.

It is noteworthy that with the Russian and US approval of the Corfu Process, both “veto players” within the OSCE have signalled their willingness to cooperate, both on the multilateral level and *within* the existing institutions. This is particularly important in the case of Russia, which has repeatedly criticised the European security organisations (OSCE, NATO) and attempted to erode their functions. It remains to be seen, however, whether Russia will keep trying to weaken the OSCE, and whether Russia’s yes vote in Athens was based mainly on tactical considerations, or if this is really evidence of a strategic reorientation of Russia’s OSCE policy.

... and its weaknesses

Even with the political declaration on the Corfu Process, the core conflicts that paralyzed the organisation in the past still have not been resolved. The meeting in Athens also made it clear that agreement over the main points of dissent is not yet in sight. These include the different weighting given to the three dimensions, the field missions deployed unilaterally in post-Communist countries, and the OSCE activities relating to the human dimension. Exemplarily, in the latter respect, the foreign ministers were unable to agree on adopting a declaration to promote freedom of the media in the OSCE area.

Reconfirming the OSCE Acquis will not be enough to overcome these deficiencies: The weaknesses in the European security architecture are not the result of a lack of programmatic declarations in the past.

What has been lacking is rather the concrete, consensual interpretation and application of the principles underlying the Acquis. The disagreements over territorial integrity and the right to self-determination that arose around Kosovo's as well as Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's secession are a prime example of this. Until serious dialogue takes place on the normative dissent underlying these conflicts, the potential of the Corfu Process will go unrealised.

Indeed, the range of planned topics for the next meeting is so broad that the Permanent Representatives in Vienna would be busy for years if they wanted to seriously address each of these problems. The questions themselves are undoubtedly important—ranging from the role of the OSCE in conflict prevention, to transnational threats, to approaches to environmental problems. Yet the program has been inflated to such an extreme extent that focused exchange is improbable. Furthermore, each state can propose whatever additional topics it sees fit. Since the foreign ministers in Athens consciously avoided formulating specific objectives, the Corfu Process threatens to deteriorate into a “talking shop” without a specific agenda. Still lacking are concrete proposals for overcoming the security deficiencies in Europe and a formal negotiation mandate—the central conditions required to inject momentum into the process. If the conceptual shortcomings cannot be remedied, the Corfu Process will simply reflect the structural weaknesses of the OSCE rather than overcoming them.

Kazakhstan, the “neutral broker”?

A decisive factor in the development of the Corfu Process will be the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship. Since January 2010, Kazakhstan has become the first post-Soviet country ever to head the organisation. The country has high expectations for its role. It wants to distinguish itself as a leading power in the post-Soviet region and lend

new lustre to the OSCE. To this end, Kazakhstan plans to host the first OSCE summit in over ten years. The country sees itself as a broker between East and West that upholds the principles and values of the OSCE. Kazakhstan has declared its intention to move the Corfu Process forward to a successful outcome. It will therefore strive to integrate discussion over a new European security architecture and Medvedev's initiative into the process.

Yet Kazakhstan is not the “neutral” broker it claims to be, either in questions of values or in foreign policy matters. In the past, the country has followed Moscow in repeatedly criticizing the emphasis on the human dimension of security within the OSCE. Commitments to reform prior to the decision over the chairmanship have remained mere lip service. To this day, Kazakhstan suffers serious deficiencies in the areas of rule of law, democracy, and human rights, all of which are essential principles of the OSCE Acquis. It is not likely that Kazakhstan will undertake serious efforts of its own accord to strengthen controversial norms in the OSCE space during its chairmanship, for example, in the area of protecting freedom of opinion. It is also questionable whether Kazakhstan can escape from Russia's shadow in matters of foreign and security policy. Moscow, for its part, will be striving to instrumentalise the Kazakh Chairmanship to advance its own security policy agenda. To this end, Russia may attempt to shift the focus to Medvedev's proposal and place stronger emphasis on the OSCE's politico-military dimension.

A new beginning for cooperative security in Europe?

Whether the Corfu Process under Kazakhstan's chairmanship is able to generate positive momentum depends on three conditions:

First, it should be ensured that the Corfu Process concentrates on the core issues of European security and that it does not drift off into side issues. A debate on the role of

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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the OSCE in Afghanistan, which Kazakhstan wants to push, is undoubtedly not among the main issues, even if the current US-Russian consensus sees it differently. The Corfu Process requires concrete improvements in the key areas in which the security policy disagreement is most acute and therefore needs to focus on a clear agenda. The revival of conventional arms control is a long overdue topic, especially because of the new possibilities for action emerging as a result of the US administration's "reset" policy towards Russia. The agenda also needs to include the peaceful and consensual settlement of territorial conflicts. In this area in particular, the principles and instruments of the OSCE have been virtually irrelevant so far. It will be important to continue intensive negotiations in the OSCE framework on settlement of the conflicts in the post-Soviet region (Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria) and in the Western Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) as well as on strengthening the OSCE instruments for conflict prevention. These will include, for example, the High Commissioner on National Minorities as well as field operations, which perform an important early warning function.

Second, the Corfu Process will have to devote itself to the controversial field of *soft security* and focus on the normative dissent between East and West. The OSCE's comprehensive security concept, which closely links the politico-military dimension with the human dimension, is a major achievement of the European security architecture. For this reason, the security dialogue under Kazakh Chairmanship cannot be allowed to degenerate into a ritual of relativisation that erodes away the human dimension. Even imploring harmony and mutual tolerance among the peoples will not be enough to strengthen the OSCE. The Kazakh leadership should be consistently reminded of its commitment to all three OSCE dimensions. Specifically, this means that, while promoting the Corfu Process, it should also support the corresponding OSCE institutions—

for example, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media—and strengthen their independence.

Third, the proposal for an OSCE summit should be supported, but only if it does not sacrifice substance for show. A summit meeting could force all of the OSCE states to adopt clear negotiation positions on the aforementioned key areas of European security for the Corfu Process. This would at least generate a certain amount of pressure to succeed. To prevent a summit from becoming nothing more than a pure matter of prestige for Kazakhstan, the western OSCE states should abandon their wait-and-see position and take on an active role by putting their own proposals on the table as soon as possible.

The Corfu Process is a litmus test for the political will of all of the OSCE states to work towards cooperative security in Europe. Only when they succeed in focusing on the normative differences between East and West can the Corfu Process reinvigorate the OSCE and launch a real security dialog. This requires the willingness, however, to clearly acknowledge contrary positions and to openly address deficiencies. Here, Germany bears a particular responsibility given its bridge function between East and West and its support for the Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship.