

The OSCE in Central Asia: Engagement, Presence, Problems

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Abstract

Central Asia is a region where the OSCE has been engaged for more than two decades, including with missions and field presences in all five participating states. This engagement reflects the hope that these countries will gradually align themselves with the values, principles and norms of the organization. The region, however, presents the following challenges. First, Central Asian states strictly adhere to state sovereignty and want to constrain the OSCE's involvement in domestic affairs. Second, these states prioritize the organization's economic and ecological dimension, and want to reduce the importance of its human rights dimension. Finally, the activity programmes of the remaining OSCE field presences in the region are subject to the approval of host governments.

Keywords

OSCE – field missions – economic – human dimension – principles – norms – self-determination – authoritarianism – security

Since the five Central Asian states have established full interaction with the CSCE/OSCE, including the opening of diplomatic representations in Vienna and the hosting of field presences in the 1990s, the level of cooperation

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has not changed dramatically. At this early stage, the Central Asian states were identified as being relatively far away from meeting the requirements enshrined in CSCE norms and principles, as far as respect for human rights and commitments in the so-called human dimension more broadly were concerned. Russia's long-standing CSCE/OSCE observer and analyst, Andrei Zagorski argued against 'quick admission of the new republics without first insisting on traditional CSCE criteria.'¹ Still, the participating states decided rapidly in favour of accepting the five states in the CSCE. This ought not to have come as a surprise to anybody. The CSCE/OSCE, if its activity is analysed on the conditionality vs. socialization spectrum, systematically opts for socialization. It works under the assumption that even though states do not meet all requirements of the organization, accession will contribute to improving their record.

When analysing circumstances that have had a profound effect on the cooperation between Central Asian states and the OSCE, one may focus on the following developments. Firstly, the change of leadership in Uzbekistan (to a much greater extent than, for example in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan) and the improving chances of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Secondly, the growing Chinese presence in the region in the context of BRI and beyond. Thirdly, regime-change in Afghanistan and the withdrawal of the international community by the end of August 2021. And fourthly, the reduced commitment of the US and the EU to the region as revealed in their Central Asia strategies.²

Each factor has repercussions for the work of the OSCE in the five participating states, and the following key aspects will be analysed further: the interests of the Central Asian states with regard to the interpretation of the OSCE 'Decalogue'; the emphasis on the organization's various dimensions and activities, including the management of conflicts; the field presences of the OSCE in

1 A. Zagorski, 'The CSCE and the New Euro-Asian Challenge'. In Michael R. Lucas (ed.), *The CSCE in the 1990: Constructing European Security and Cooperation*. Baden-Baden, 1993, p. 282. It is clear from the text that Zagorski refers to the Central Asian states and not to other former Soviet republics. However, retroactively similar reservations could have been pronounced concerning the other post-Soviet states as well.

2 Both the EU and the United States passed new strategies on Central Asia at the end of the 2010s and both have diplomatically downscaled their level of commitment and ambition. A ranking EU diplomat indicated that the new strategy was 'more realistic' than the earlier one. See General Secretariat of the Council, *Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia*. June 17, 2019 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf> and Department of State, *United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025: Advancing Sovereignty and Economic Prosperity (Overview)*, February 5, 2020 <https://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity/>.

Central Asia and the challenges they have been facing; and the resources the OSCE devotes to Central Asia.

The Helsinki Decalogue: One Text, Various Interpretations

The states that participate in the OSCE have committed themselves to adhere to the ten principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, that are meant to guide the relations between them. However, there are different interpretations of these principles and states place their own emphases. Participating states have been divided on these matters for a longer time without bringing this discussion to a conclusive end. A similar debate among independent OSCE experts has also been going on for decades, without much effect on the positions of the participating states.

Those experts who focus on the human dimension, and who are of the opinion that this domain should be at the top of the organization's agenda, advocate that the right to self-determination and the respect for human rights should have priority over other principles enshrined in the Decalogue.³ I took a more differentiated position and reasoned that while those two principles may be important in their own right but they cannot serve as the foundation of the entire organization, and a certain balance needs to be preserved between the various principles of the Helsinki Decalogue.⁴ This lack of balance began to backfire once the Russian Federation embarked upon a revisionist policy in the so-called post-Soviet space and started to emphasize the right to self-determination to legitimize, among other things, its policies vis-à-vis Crimea. This prompted the international community to refocus on territorial integrity and political independence, the two main composite elements of state sovereignty, in order to counter Russia's case. Since then, the debate concerning the Decalogue has been muted.

Central Asian leaders have frequently invoked the principles of sovereignty and non-interference. Some of the Central Asian states have genuine, legitimate reasons for emphasizing the principle of territorial integrity. Indeed, they are challenged by developments in their neighbourhood, like in Afghanistan, or face border disputes with neighbouring states that often result in border skirmishes, as occurred recently between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There may have been good reasons for the CSCE/OSCE to have shown tolerance toward

3 A. Bloed, 'CIS presidents attack the functioning of the OSCE', *Helsinki Monitor*, vol. 15, no 3, 2004, p. 220.

4 P. Dunay, *The OSCE in Crisis*, Chaillot Paper, no. 88, April 2016, pp. 36–37.

the new participating states, including the Central Asian countries, in the early days of their participation. However, what was rational 25–30 years ago should in the meantime have been reassessed and have reduced the possibilities for states to hide behind ‘sovereignty’ arguments.

Dimensions and Activities of Emphasis: Does the OSCE Address the Right Matters?

It derives from the comprehensive concept of security that the OSCE addresses, with a very broad array of issues that vary from one participating state to another, and also depends on the focus of the country holding the rotating chairmanship-in-office. These two factors make it extremely difficult to present a consolidated picture of OSCE priorities and/or activities in various participating states. If we attempt to categorize the evolution of the position of the Central Asian states in the OSCE, the following periodization may be helpful.

First, in the 1990s the Central Asian states received ‘soft’ guidance and overall enjoyed the tolerance of the OSCE community. Moreover, as the West was preoccupied with other matters and a ‘Russia first’ policy prevailing in the post-Soviet space, little attention was dedicated to a strategically less prominent region as Central Asia. The second decade of Central Asian independence represented a change in multiple ways. It became increasingly clear that the lack of prosperity and inadequate socio-economic structures would hamper Central Asian states to escape the narrow confines of their past, in a region with short-lived histories of independence. Signs of democratic transformation remained scant and were limited to one or two Central Asian states. The West, noticing the Russian aspiration to exert influence in the post-Soviet space, reassessed the role of Central Asia, although it remained a relatively remote region that lacked the immediate conflict potential that was apparent in other regions such as the South Caucasus. Furthermore, Russia’s seemingly limited involvement in the region reduced the interest of some large OSCE participating states. The economic interaction between the West and the region remained limited and did not constitute an incentive to generate more western interest. There was only one counter-acting factor in Central Asia that elevated the region’s role: the fact that it borders Afghanistan. The third decade of Central Asia’s OSCE participation saw both continuity and a rearrangement of relations. After the 2010 Kyrgyz revolt, renewed attention was paid to that country as it carried the hope of democratic development. With the leadership transition in Uzbekistan in 2016, hopes were rising that the most populous state of the region would wave goodbye to the dictatorial policies that marked the rule of its former president. Regime transformation was at least partly successful and although Tashkent did not

introduce democracy, its relationship with the OSCE has become far more accommodating. These cases indicate once more that change in the Central Asian states continues to depend on domestic forces, that may be supported by the OSCE, or other international organizations and individual states. As the international community gradually wound down its troop numbers in Afghanistan, Central Asian countries started to cut down their logistical support (e.g., the closing of the Manas airbase for US military use, or the wavering support of Uzbekistan to the so-called Northern Distribution Network) and Afghanistan stopped serving as a magnet for attention to Central Asia. The most spectacular change directly linked to the OSCE's role in the region occurred with the decision of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to downscale their respective OSCE field presences from full-fledged missions to programme offices. At this moment there is only one full-fledged OSCE mission left in Central Asia, in Turkmenistan. Interestingly, that mission is also the smallest field presence in the region, both in terms of budget and personnel (see Tables 1 and 2). The difference between various forms of field presences is being blurred as far as personnel and budgetary resources are concerned.

The Central Asian region is possibly the best 'customer' of the OSCE. Central Asia presents a broad variety of security problems, and the organization can make use of its comprehensive concept of security. However, there is a certain disharmony between what the participating states in the region would like to achieve, and where the OSCE can best deliver. The Central Asian states would like to minimize the OSCE focus on the human dimension, and rather address politico-military and economic and ecological issues. The OSCE human dimension ambition reaches into the core of the political ecosystem, which is considered essential by the local regimes for reasons of political stability (the terminology preferred by the states of the region) or regime perpetuation (what it often comes down to). The actual situation varies per country. Kyrgyzstan may be regarded as an exception during parts of its post-Soviet history when it operated as a fairly democratic country. Still, on three occasions (in 2005, 2010 and 2020) political dissatisfaction boiled over and resulted in violence. The regime's responses to these upheavals may indicate a tendency to return to an earlier mixed (or 'anocratic') regime type.

Central Asian objections to the emphasis on the human dimension are well-known. They range from efforts to push these topics to the backburner (for instance during the only term the chairmanship was held by a Central Asian state, namely Kazakhstan in 2010⁵) to attempts to change the functions

5 The Kazakh OSCE Chairmanship of 2010 was unique in the sense it had the longest list of chairmanship priorities ever. Kazakhstan identified fifteen priorities overall. Human dimension issues appeared on the bottom of the list and focused on four areas: Improve the mechanisms to combat trafficking in human beings, promote gender equality policy, pay attention to the rule of law related to human rights and democracy, emphasize fundamental human rights and freedoms.

of OSCE missions and field presences into mere project offices that are strictly subject to host-state approval. Tajikistan worked for years to marginalize the human dimension on the OSCE agenda. To some extent, Dushanbe succeeded when the OSCE mission changed into a programme office in 2017. Diplomatic communication indicated that the Tajik leadership wanted the OSCE to be more helpful with the economy and to reduce its involvement in human rights and rule of law issues. As a ranking Tajik diplomat ominously remarked during a bilateral consultation: 'Nobody wants to wake up to a big surprise.' In the end, Tajikistan kept the matter in balance and, understanding some of the benefits of hosting an OSCE presence, did not take it to the final step of closing down.

The Central Asian states have a more positive attitude towards the politico-military security dimension of the organization. They are willing to discuss matters which are of high importance to the region, like terrorist threats. In this framework the 'complementary' approach (including seminars and the exchange of views on best practices) are being welcomed. These countries also appreciate concrete assistance programmes, like capacity building to facilitate the modernization of penitentiary facilities in Kyrgyzstan. Still, given the complexity of these matters it is difficult to measure the effects of these programmes.

All Central Asian states show a clear preference for the OSCE's least conspicuous sphere, the economic and environmental cooperation dimension. This is understandable, as three Central Asian countries are among the poorest participating states. In fact, in various respects they may be regarded as developing countries that still carry the burden of their Soviet legacies. The region also faces some severe environmental problems, e.g., the Aral Sea or, in a broader sense, water distribution issues as well as air pollution levels,⁶ while domestic resources to resolve these matters are lacking. Environmental NGOs have insufficient capacity, and public awareness of the problem is limited. The OSCE can help address such issues, even though it has very limited means at its disposal, certainly in comparison with international financial institutions or organizations like the EU. The OSCE, being present on the ground, may rather act as a whistle-blower and raise international awareness.

The activities of OSCE field presences are confined to the state where they are accredited. There is no mandate to address cross-border matters, while many of the most pressing issues involve more than one Central

6 This went so far that upon my visit to Bishkek in November 2019, before COVID-19 lamed international travel, it was the country's prime minister (and not the city's mayor) who called on the people of Bishkek to stay indoors due to air quality and in particular to not let children out.

Asian state. When Kazakhstan presented its chairmanship priorities for 2010, it stressed the significance of a regional approach. The then-speaker of the Kazakh Senate (and current president of the country) Kassym-Jomart Tokayev pointed out: ‘Kazakhstan aims to increase Central Asia’s significance in the OSCE. It seeks to enroot the OSCE’s common values in the region. Kazakhstan aims to make its contribution to ensuring security and stability in Eurasia.’⁷ Suffice to say that such security and stability to a large extent exactly depends on cross-border and regional issues. In addressing these issues, local field presences on the ground are probably better informed about the situation than the organization’s headquarters in Vienna. This does not change the fact, of course, that some missions are better positioned than others to effectively deal with cross-border conflict contingencies, and that some heads of missions are more capable or ambitious to handle such issues than others.

In the Field: Spreading and Constraining Presence

The OSCE attributes great importance to its presence in the field. Although the amounts disbursed by the organization are small, the field mission may still observe developments in the host state that are relevant for the entire OSCE community, that may want to draw conclusions from them. As many OSCE participating states also form part of donor communities (e.g., the EU, US, Norway, and Switzerland) these field observations may trigger concerted action. However, I personally think that the OSCE’s insistence on field presences in participating states who do not demonstrate any interest in aligning their governmental systems with the organization’s basic values and norms, weakens its position. But experienced diplomats hold different views. The US representative to the OSCE recently characterized the OSCE Field Operations as the organization’s ‘crown jewels’: ‘they should be enabled and encouraged to provide objective information about the situation in their host countries, engage with civil society, and have straightforward conversations with their hosts on implementing their OSCE commitments in all three dimensions.’⁸ Still, considering options that would rebalance

7 Statement by H.E. Mr. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at the Winter Meeting of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Vienna, 20 February 2009, PA.DEL/3/09/Corr.1, 24 February 2009, pp. 6–7.

8 United States Mission to the OSCE, Response to the Inaugural Remarks by the OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid, as delivered by the Chargé d’Affaires Courtney Austrian to the Permanent Council, Vienna, January 21, 2021. PC.DEL/28/21.

the relations between the organization and the states hosting field missions would be in the best interest of the OSCE.

Heads of field missions report to the OSCE Permanent Council annually. The written reports are available to every participating state, including the host state. To avoid conflicts and to be able to continue the activities of the field missions, these representatives often deliver reports that are overly diplomatic and reveal little about the deeper causes of domestic tensions or risks of inter-state conflicts, but instead concentrate on presenting a rather sterile catalogue of activities.

Priorities, Resources, and Governmental Resistance

Whenever the contribution of an international organization to a region is to be assessed, there are two basic matters to consider. First, what are the material resources that are allocated both in absolute terms and in comparison with other states/regions? Second, what is the level of competence of those who represent the organization in the relevant state or region?

The OSCE is a collective security organization with a very broad-ranging agenda. This entails expectations, values, principles, norms, knowledge, support, and assistance from established democracies with higher levels of economic development and environmental standards. The Western Balkans and the post-Soviet region have traditionally been the main recipients of OSCE assistance programmes. The gradual closing down of OSCE missions in various participating states (including in Croatia, Belarus, and the South Caucasus) resulted in a concentration of missions and offices in the five Central Asian states.

A closer look shows that the attention, as reflected in the financial resources allocated to the five Central Asian field presences, is fairly steady. This is even more interesting as changes occurred in several Central Asian states, such as in Uzbekistan where the transition of leadership in 2016 resulted in a much more forthcoming attitude towards the OSCE. Such developments did not, however, lead to significantly changed levels of spending (see Table 1). If we take Tajikistan as an example, where a noticeable backtracking on human dimension issues has occurred, we can also conclude that this trend has not led to a change in budget allocations. We may conclude, therefore, that the size and budgets of OSCE field presences are neither based on short-term or longer-term political considerations. Other influencing factors may come into play here, such as a lack of political will, the force of legacy, or just bureaucratic inertia.

The same applies to OSCE personnel, with two important caveats that are not region specific. Namely, the OSCE has been systematically reducing the share of international personnel and relies more than ever on local employees. Among the internationals, the share of personnel seconded by participating states has risen at the expense of contracted professionals. Both phenomena are closely related to the low budgets at the OSCE's disposal.⁹ It would be wrong to assume that the changed composition of staff has a bearing upon the quality of the work of the missions. Local personnel are often qualified and committed. There are two other relevant elements that are less related to long-term tendencies: the OSCE financially benefited from the termination of missions that freed up funds in the unified budget, which proved impossible to reallocate, due to opposition from the Russian Federation that has only been recently lifted. Furthermore, since 2014 priority has been given to the OSCE's Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (which has a separate budget): an operation much bigger in scope and size than any other OSCE field presence.

Conclusions

The OSCE remains an important organization in Central Asia, a region that has been integrated sparsely in international institutions. There is not a single regional organization, be it the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) that counts all five Central Asian states among its members. In this respect, the OSCE is unique. However, the effect the OSCE has had on these countries in terms of reforms remains limited.

Due to the piecemeal alignment of Central Asian policies with OSCE values, principles and norms, the attention of the organization to the region must be sustained. Even if the last decades provided strong indications that changes in the region primarily occur due to domestic developments, the OSCE is still able to contribute to reforms.

9 The total unified budget of the OSCE was € 138,204,100 in 2020. If we count everything against the OSCE spending consisting of three parts: unified budget, extra-budgetary (ExB) contributions and the part of spending on the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) that is not categorized as ExB, the total increases to nearly € 246 million. The annual budget of the European Union is € 168.7 billion. It means that the EU spends approximately 686 times more than the OSCE annually. Or to put it more plausibly, the EU spends the annual spending of the OSCE in a bit more than half a day. States, which think pragmatically and hope to attract external funding understandably do not look at the OSCE when they think about a donor.

TABLE 1 OSCE Budgetary Spending on Presence in Central Asia¹⁰

Participating state	Unified budget ¹¹		Extra-budgetary contributions ¹²	
	Total (€)	Share (%)	Total (€)	Share (%)
Kazakhstan				
2010	2'188'200	1.43	n.a.	–
2015	2'148'700	1.50	63'075	0.25
2020	2'232'700	1.62	39'629	0.097
Kyrgyzstan				
2010	7'092'300	4.64	n.a.	–
2015	6'909'600	4.83	1'888'114	7.41
2020	2'232'700	1.62	600'531	1.46
Tajikistan				
2010	5'926'200	3.88	n.a.	–
2015	7'338'200	5.12	3'372'649	13.23
2020	7'311'600	5.29	1'520'812	3.7
Turkmenistan				
2010	1'401'700	0.92	n.a.	–
2015	1'570'800	1.10	139'553	0.55
2020	1'661'200	1.20	164'580	0.44
Uzbekistan				
2010	1'868'300	1.22	n.a.	–
2015	1'994'900	1.39	–	–
2020	2'499'200	1.81	149'365	0.36
Total				
2010	18'476'700	12.09	n.a.	–
2015	19'962'200	13.49	5'463'391	21.43
2020	20'515'700	14.84	2'474'917	6.04

10 The sources of the table: Annual Report on OSCE Activities 2010. Vienna, OSCE, 2011; OSCE Annual Report 2015. Vienna, OSCE, 2016; OSCE Annual Report 2020. Vienna, OSCE, 2021. In some cases the data provided by the OSCE are recalculated due to their inaccuracy.

11 The OSCE Unified Budget in 2010: € 152'856'900; in 2015: € 143'184'700; in 2020: € 138'204'100.

12 The Extra-budgetary Contributions to the OSCE in 2015: € 25'497'268; in 2020: € 40'992'402.

TABLE 2 OSCE staff employed in the Central Asian participating States

	International	Local	Total
Kazakhstan			
2015	6	22	28
2020	6	22	28
Kyrgyzstan			
2015	23	125	148
2020	13	110	123
Tajikistan			
2015	32	198	230
2020	24	145 (inc. ExB)	169
Turkmenistan			
2015	6	19	25
2020	6	23	29
Uzbekistan			
2015	3	22	25
2020	4	35	39
Total			
2015	70	386	456
2020	53	335	388

SOURCE: ANNUAL REPORT ON OSCE ACTIVITIES 2020 (VIENNA, 2021)

Regarding the OSCE, the Central Asian participating states have a clear agenda: increase the activities within the framework of the economic-environmental dimension, reduce the number of human rights projects and focus on those politico-military issues that are relevant in terms of regional security and stability. This agenda comes down to taking advantage of OSCE support and assistance programmes when they benefit the government's legitimacy while not allowing interference in the country's internal developments.

Meanwhile, the OSCE's investments in Central Asia do not seem to reflect developments on the ground. On the one hand, this is a consequence of restrictions imposed by the five states concerned, still acting as hosts to OSCE missions and offices. On the other hand, wider political and bureaucratic reasons play a role as well, further limiting the organization's potential in a region that has recently been gaining in strategic importance.