OSCE activities in Central Asia

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During my visits to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan I met quite a number of people from Western Europe who were fascinated by the culture, the natural beauty and the specific charm and hospitality of the people in Central Asia. And I have to confess that with each one of my trips I came closer to similar feelings. I am left with doubt: if the people and the countries of Central Asia were better known, there would be more support for their efforts to cope with the challenges of an extended transition phase in a particularly difficult environment. For a long time I have therefore considered raising awareness about our partners in Central Asia among all the OSCE participating States to be perhaps the key task of the OSCE.

I. The Central Asian States within the OSCE
1. When one speaks about Central Asia one is speaking about a world which had almost been forgotten for more than a hundred years. Until the breakup of the Soviet Union it was something like a white spot on all maps outside the SU. And even the other day a German actor spoke about a film which he had made in Tajikistan, describing this place as 'a forgotten country at the end of the world'.

However, today this situation is changing with increasing speed. To mention only some events during 2000: The American Secretary of State, M. Albright, visited the area for 5 days in April. President Putin, on 18 and 19 May, paid his first visit to a foreign country — to Uzbekistan. The Shanghai Five, i.e. the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia and China met again on 5 July, this time in Dushanbe — and with President Karimov of Uzbekistan participating as an observer. The Trilateral Commission is about to finalise a report on Central Asia. Tourism has started. Films from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Luna Papa) can be admired in our cinemas.

At the same time bad news from the region are attracting the headlines. We are told that drugs, international crime, and international terrorism are increasingly moving through Central Asia on their way to Europe. In its 1999 report on international terrorism the US State Department stated, that the centre of international terrorism has shifted from the Near East to the 'Afghanistan Region'.

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1 This article is based on a presentation by the author to the 'Summer Academy on OSCE' in Stadtshlaining/Austria in July 2000.
2 A series of visits to Central Asia commenced in 1994 when I was OSCE Secretary General; my last visit was in October 1999 accompanying the then Norwegian OSCE Chairman in Office, Foreign Minister Knut Vollebaek.
3 The Trilateral Commission (Europe, the USA and Japan) is a framework for discussing and analysing political and economic issues relevant to its participants.
Some believe that with the visibly increasing interest on the part of the Russian Federation and the US in Central Asia, we might see another 'great game', this time concerning this region. But this is at best a 'terrible simplification'. Our world cannot be compared with the imperialist world of the mid-19th century. Today the situation in and around Central Asia is much more complex, there are more players involved and different issues are at stake.

2. One element in this different world of today is the OSCE. In January 1992 — less than 4 weeks after the end of the SU — the 5 countries of Central Asia were admitted to the CSCE. There was some hesitation as to whether these new states, clearly outside the geographical scope of Europe, should have a place in this Euro-transatlantic framework. But in the end there was agreement: the way in which these countries should be supported in their efforts towards building stability was by inclusion not exclusion.

At the same Ministerial Council Meeting in Prague in 1992 when the Central Asian countries were admitted, Ministers agreed to establish 'a programme of co-ordinated support (for the new CSCE states) through which appropriate diplomatic, academic, legal and administrative expertise and advice on CSCE matters could be made available'.

This was the beginning of a two-way process by which to increase integration and co-operation between the Central Asian states and the OSCE. The Central Asian states developed their capacities for active participation in OSCE decision making and activities; and the OSCE increased, step by step, its capacities for providing support for the difficult transition processes of its partners in Central Asia.

3. This co-operation developed in several phases. In a first phase the Chairman-in-Office (CiO) and the OSCE institutions established contacts with the leadership of these countries in order to discover where and how the OSCE could be helpful. As they reported on their visits and their discussions in the OSCE fora, all OSCE states began to realise that with the extension of the OSCE they had engaged in new reciprocal commitments. But designing co-operative programmes for a whole region of 'Newly Independent States' resulted in the OSCE being faced with a particularly new challenge. The OSCE was based on the concept of comprehensive security; but the operational capabilities of the OSCE were extremely limited. So, right from the beginning, the particular problem was, to discover in which areas OSCE activities had comparative advantages within the network of international organisations which were ready to become involved in Central Asia.

As is so often the case in the CSCE/OSCE history an emergency now challenged the organisation to act. In early 1993 the civil war in Tajikistan had culminated in bloody conflict. Although the management of this conflict was in the hands of the UN, all OSCE states felt that particularly in the areas of human rights, democracy and the rule of law the OSCE had an obligation to support the efforts of the UN. This led to the first OSCE Mission to the area. In December 1993 the Permanent Council established a permanent presence in Dushanbe which was staffed by, at the beginning, 4 international personnel. The mandate