Kazakhstan’s OSCE Chairmanship: a Halfway State of Affairs

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Introduction
The Silk Road was a nexus of trade roads across the Asian region, connecting the Eastern, Western and Southern regions of the world. It facilitated a global exchange of trade, ideas and cultures in Central Asia. At the dawn of the 21st century, Kazakhstan has now gained a unique opportunity to breathe new life into this glorious heritage by bridging, once again, what was at that time known as ‘the seven seas’ of the world.

At the beginning of 2010, Kazakhstan commenced its OSCE chairmanship. It was a disputed designation as Astana is regularly blamed by many other participating states for not fulfilling human rights standards, a key value promoted by the OSCE. The genuine question is now: how has Kazakhstan performed in the first six months of its chairmanship?

In order to answer this question, the first section of this paper will pay particular attention to the domestic situation of Kazakhstan and its international commitments. The purpose is to determine in what way and to what extent the country meets the requisites of the organisation and to find out whether it has the capacity to run it. The second section will bring to light the basic reasons as to why Kazakhstan should be placed at the helm of the OSCE, and will also weigh the consequences for the country and for the organisation. Ultimately, this paper will shed some light on the achievements of this peculiar chairmanship after six months for the participating states.

Extremely positive consequences may be expected if Kazakhstan takes this historic challenge seriously in spite of some inherent — and unavoidable — drawbacks. The OSCE could serve as a springboard for Kazakhstan to rebrand its image on the international scene, while Kazakhstan could help build a new destiny for the OSCE. Thanks to what is commonly known as the domino effect, such a dynamic approach could have a positive outcome for the whole Euro-Asia region.

This paper, written at the time when Kazakhstan was halfway through its chairmanship, does not aspire to assess the performance of Kazakhstan in this role. It is too early to carry out such an evaluation. The paper is rather an interim description of the state of affairs and it provides some prospects for Kazakhstan and the OSCE.

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The profile of Kazakhstan

To appoint a country at the helm of the OSCE, it is vital to assess its domestic situation to determine in what way the country meets the basic democratic principles of the organisation and consequently whether it has the ability to chair it. This section shows both the intrinsic challenges Kazakhstan is facing and the strengths contributing to its favourable reputation in terms of chairmanship. It will unveil the weaknesses of the Kazakh political system, its troubled human rights — in particular political rights — situation, two huge environmental disasters, its economic situation, and its visibility on the international scene.

The political system

Kazakhstan was the last of the Soviet republics to declare its independence on 16 December 1991. Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had been the head of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan since 1989, and second Secretary before that, was elected president in 1991. Since then, he has made no secret of his iron-fist policy.

President Nazarbayev was re-elected in 1998 and 2005 in landslide victories with over 90% of the votes. However, the OSCE concluded that these elections did not meet international standards due to ‘significant shortcomings’. Nevertheless, when compared to other Central Asian states, where reports by OSCE Election Observation Missions stated that the elections ‘had failed to meet key OSCE commitments for democratic election’, the assessment of Kazakhstan’s election was still relatively positive. In May 2007, the President amended the Constitution to shorten the presidential term from seven to five years, and to limit the presidency to a maximum of two consecutive terms. This new regulation will only come into effect once his term ends. It means that he could run the country for life.

President Nazarbayev’s clout is strengthened by the fact that he is the one who appoints the Council of Ministers and the governors, while also controlling the Upper House (the Senate) and the Lower House (the Majilis). To win seats in Parliament, the opposition parties must receive no less than 7% of the vote (threshold value), which they failed to do during the last parliamentary election in 2007.

President Nazarbayev’s sway over the executive and the legislative branches is uncontested, but his personal grip on the judicial branch is far more difficult to assess. However, several influential political leaders or businessmen have been sued and they were suddenly accused of robbery, organised crime, or even murder when they expressed their opposition to the regime or fell from grace. This might demonstrate that the President exerts a tremendous influence over the judiciary.

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