From Corfu to Astana: The way to the 2010 OSCE summit

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On 3 August 2010, the OSCE Ministerial Council (MC) decided to convene an OSCE summit meeting in Astana on 1 and 2 December 2010,² the first of its kind since the 1999 Istanbul Summit. This was preceded by an informal Ministerial Council meeting in Almaty/Kazakhstan on 16/17 July, where a corresponding consensus was reached. After a decade of growing tensions, this opens up a great opportunity for the participating States to address profoundly changed threats and challenges on the basis of a re-established cooperative security approach. For Kazakhstan, a country which was long seen by many in the West as being too immature and unreliable to carry off an OSCE chairmanship, the Astana Summit means final recognition as a strategically relevant player.

This article follows the development from the 2008 Helsinki MC meeting via the informal MC meeting in Corfu in June 2009 to the 2009 Athens MC, and further to Almaty. It analyzes how questions of substance were linked to the meeting format. In more detail, the essay asks which substantial questions were addressed within the OSCE’s Corfu process, whether these issues were of strategic or subordinate importance, and what items will probably make it onto the summit agenda. Finally, it addresses the question of how the positions of the OSCE’s main players – the US, the Russian Federation and the EU states – have been developing.

From Helsinki 2008 to Almaty 2010: The Corfu Process

Strictly speaking, the discussion process on the future of European security, which later became known as the ‘Corfu Process’, started at the 2008 Helsinki MC meeting. There, at a working lunch, ministers held discussions that ‘concentrated on the future of security in Europe, including the recent initiatives presented by Russia and France’ and agreed ‘that the OSCE is the most suitable venue for these discussions’.³ The ‘issue of a possible summit’ was also addressed, but ‘there seemed to be certain reluctance at this stage’. (Ibid).

The 2009 Greek Chairmanship took up and further developed this starting point and issued an invitation to an informal MC meeting in June 2009 on the Greek island of Corfu, the first meeting of this kind. In her concluding remarks, the

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² OSCE, Ministerial Council, Decision 3/10, Time and Venue of the Next OSCE Summit and Review Conference, MC.DEC/3/10, 3 August 2010. OSCE documents are available at the OSCE website (www.osce.org).
Chairperson-in-Office, the Greek Foreign Minister Bakoyannis, stated that ministers ‘agreed on the need for an open, sustained, wide-ranging and inclusive dialogue on security and concurred that the OSCE is a natural forum to anchor this dialogue’\(^4\) and tasked her ‘Permanent Representative in Vienna to explore with all participating States ways for a more structured dialogue’ (ibid.). During the months that followed, the Greek Chair organized a series of discussion meetings at ambassadorial level that covered the whole range of the OSCE’s agenda from common norms and principles to arms control, transnational threats, conflict resolution, the human as well as the economic and environmental dimensions. At that stage, the Corfu Process was still an initiative by the Chairperson, although supported by an informal consensus among the States.

This changed at the 2009 Athens MC meeting, where ministers decided ‘to continue the informal, regular and open dialogue, in the framework of the Corfu Process, through regular informal meetings, at the level of permanent representatives’\(^5\). The subjects of discussion were the same as in the first round of the Corfu Process, from ‘[i]mplementation of all OSCE norms, principles and commitments’, ‘early warning, conflict prevention and resolution’, the ‘arms control and confidence- and security-building regime’, and ‘[t]ransnational and multidimensional threats and challenges’ to ‘[e]conomic and environmental challenges’, ‘[h]uman rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as democracy and the rule of law’, ‘[e]nhancing the OSCE’s effectiveness’, and ‘[i]nteraction with other organizations and institutions’ (ibid.). The issue of a summit was addressed as follows: ‘We note with interest its [Kazakhstan’s] proposal to hold an OSCE summit in 2010. We point out that such a high-level meeting would require adequate preparation in terms of substance and modalities’.\(^6\)

The intention of the Western States was to initiate a discussion on the future of European security, and at the same time to create a political space where the proposal of the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev for a European Security Treaty could be discussed without committing Western States too early to certain results or a binding negotiating format. Therefore, the OSCE was an obvious choice as a discussion platform.

For a number of reasons, Russia has never felt particularly satisfied with the whole construction of the Corfu Process. There are some indications that Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov tried to torpedo it at the Athens MC meeting, obviously without success. The basic reason for Russia’s discomfort is that it is the OSCE that has been chosen as the arena for the discussion on the future of European security. This organization is characterized by its comprehensive security approach including

\(^4\) Corfu Informal Meeting of OSCE Foreign Ministers on the Future of European Security, Chair’s Concluding Statement to the Press.