Kyrgyz crisis, a headache for the OSCE

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1. The new revolution in Kyrgyzstan
Kyrgyzstan has given the international community many headaches this year. Almost completely unexpectedly a mass demonstration against the corrupt regime of Kurmanbek Bakiev in Talas on the 6th of April resulted in a nationwide uprising that caused the government to fall within a day. Government orders to open fire on the crowds resulted in many casualties (reportedly more than 70 people died), but Bakiev’s complete control of the security forces did not save the regime. The April developments were reminiscent of the more peaceful Tulip Revolution that swept away the Akaev regime only five years previously.

Overnight an interim administration under Roza Otunbaeva took over power which remained rather shaky, in particular in the south of the country where the demoted ex-President Bakiev had his power base. The OSCE’s Chairman-in-Office, the Kazakh foreign minister, managed to convince Bakiev to leave the south of Kyrgyzstan. He is now enjoying exile in Belarus which offered him a safe haven. It was surprising that the unrest in April started more or less spontaneously, as most opposition leaders were detained and released only on the day of the riots. Although the riots were followed by looting, they were much less severe than in 2005, when state control totally collapsed for a few days. This time the opposition leaders quickly managed to express some sense of control that prevented the looting from becoming too widespread.

In June the situation became completely out of hand when, out of nowhere, the southern towns of Osh and Jalalabad suddenly became the scene of widespread looting and the killing of, in particular, members of the large Uzbek minority in the region. Hundreds of people lost their lives in just a couple of days. In total, the amount of casualties is unprecedented in the poor Central-Asian country. Besides, the turmoil in the south resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe as hundreds of thousands of people fled their (partially burnt) homes and many of them crossed the border into Uzbekistan. The latter country attracted a great deal of praise for its flexible attitude in opening up the border during the catastrophe. All in all, it was obvious that Kyrgyzstan was on the brink of civil war and that danger is still far from over.

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The international community had great difficulty in finding effective ways to support the troubled country from ending up in chaos once again. Moscow quickly recognized the new interim administration in Bishkek, following months of growing Russian criticism of the Bakiev regime which had lost Russian support through its unreliability. But calls from the new Kyrgyz leadership for the Russians to intervene militarily went unheeded. Also Kyrgyz calls to the CSTO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (of which Kyrgyzstan is also a member), to provide peacekeeping support remained unanswered, as it became obvious that nobody was interested in burning its fingers in the Kyrgyz turmoil. The crisis undoubtedly came as an unpleasant and unexpected surprise for Kyrgyzstan’s neighbour Kazakhstan which this year holds the OSCE Chairmanship. Although Kazakhstan is very proud of its handling of the crisis, the reality may be somewhat more nuanced. Although Kazakhstan undoubtedly played a very active role in the crisis, mediating between the parties and trying to raise support from other actors, at the same time it hermetically closed its borders to Kyrgyzstan for months, thereby damaging the usually very active cross-border trade and normal contacts between the people of the two countries. Apparently it was very afraid of a cross-over of the Kyrgyz virus into authoritarian Kazakhstan itself. The Kazakh President Nazarbaev also did not hide his disgust at the developments in Kyrgyzstan, labeling it, during a speech at a regional conference, as an ‘act of banditry’, not a revolution. In Bishkek the Kazakh Chair of the OSCE was often acting in tandem with representatives of the EU and the UN, publicly demonstrating a good coordination with other, more powerful international players in its efforts to promote stability in Kyrgyzstan and the Central-Asian region. But at the same time Kazakhstan must have observed with dismay the very far-reaching democratic reforms that the new Kyrgyz leadership introduced in the new constitution which were submitted to a referendum at the end of June and which gave Kyrgyzstan the most democratic, parliamentary political system in the whole region. This sharply contrasts with the Kazakh developments, where Parliament recently declared Nazarbaev to be ‘the leader of the nation’ without any limitation on the term of his presidency and guaranteeing him immunity from prosecution for any possible crime after he would leave office in the future.

Not only the OSCE Chairmanship has been busy with the Kyrgyz crisis, also other OSCE institutions have been actively involved. It even resulted in a very rare early warning signal from the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities on the 12th of June, the day after the start of the bloody events in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The HCNM has only once previously issued an early warning, i.e. in 1999 during the Kosovo war in relation to internal developments in Macedonia. An early warning is officially supposed to indicate that a situation is likely to escalate into violence, urgently requiring a response from the OSCE community. Not everybody fully understood the reasoning behind the early warning on this occasion, since violence had already widely erupted and was known throughout the world. Some observers therefore considered that this early warning was somewhat