

The OSCE in perspective, six years of service, six questions and a few answers

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The Arab spring has brought back to memory the events of the early 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe and put the OSCE experience in a new perspective. Each participating state, however different their situation may be, is bound by the commitments it has undertaken within the OSCE and it is expected to fulfil them. Although many states are considered to be more advanced, none has a perfect record. All of them are involved in a multidimensional process of building stability, security, prosperity, fostering human dignity and democratic development.

This ambitious project raises a number of questions that invite thoughtful debate: How well are OSCE participating states actually doing in their own area at present? What are the lessons to be learnt from the OSCE process 35 years after Helsinki? Can an organization along the lines of the OSCE be helpful in managing democratic transitions in circumstances that are different to the ones experienced in Central and Eastern Europe?

These issues were recurring ones throughout my tenure as Secretary General of the Organization from 2005 to 2011. Because the OSCE is such an unusual and complex process, I propose to address them in a question and answer mode, taking responsibility for selecting six key topics from the rich experience of helping to run the OSCE before attempting to draw any conclusions.

How important is the OSCE to its participating states?

The CSCE pioneered a process of continuous consultations among the participating states of Europe, Asia and North America, leading to the adoption of declarations on principles, values and commitments adopted by Summits and Ministerial meetings and developing them in the early 1990s and beyond. It avoided having recourse to legally binding conventions and protocols or formal treaties. It relied on intense multilateral contacts, peer pressure and on the goodwill of each state to implement these far-reaching declarations that concerned relations among states and developments within each society.

The OSCE followed these practices and made them somewhat more systematic by organizing the process of consultations around two standing fora in Vienna, meeting every week, and through a constant flow of ad hoc meetings related to the different dimensions of security and new topics promoted in the course of the debates among participating states. The weekly meetings of the forum for security cooperation and of the permanent council require lengthy preparations and consultations in multiple formats that are time-consuming for all delegations. Furthermore, there is hardly a week where there are less than two or three regular (the Annual Security Review Conference, meetings of the three committees in Vienna, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, the Economic and Environmental Forum) or ad hoc meetings in or outside Vienna. Annual ministerial meetings are expected to provide an overview and guidance for this non-stop activity. OSCE summits have fallen out of favour probably because of the competition from too many other formats and it took Kazakhstan a great deal of energy and dedication to bring together the Astana summit of 2010.

The task of preparing, adopting the agendas and assembling active participants to this constant flow of diversified consultations coming on top of regular meetings largely rests on the shoulders of the chairmanship which has to dedicate considerable energy thereto. The meetings draw on a multiplicity of professional and academic networks including NGOs that make a considerable contribution to the process of collective thinking within the OSCE. It is almost impossible for most participating states to be actively present at all these meetings due to a lack of human and financial resources, leaving only the biggest participants with

an overall view of the multiple activities taking place within the OSCE framework. In effect, only the United States and the Russian Federation have delegations which are large enough to follow every aspect of the ongoing debates. The bigger EU countries, Canada, Turkey and Norway adopt a de facto selective approach to OSCE debates focusing on a few topics and acting as chef defiles within the European Union on a given issue. The post-Lisbon European Union (EU) delegation does not yet have the capabilities to be present on all fronts but it helps the EU member states to shape common positions on many topics. Smaller delegations select areas of interest and often align themselves with the EU position which therefore frequently reflects the views of up to 40 participating states. Other delegations tend to become single-issue delegations dedicated to defending national interests on well-identified problems and rarely intervening beyond them.

This intense consultative machinery is in itself a great achievement because it represents the equivalent of a permanent security council among European states on a great variety of issues. It remains, sadly, a fairly marginal one in terms of the broader picture of international relations among Europeans and Asians. The two actors that pay most attention to it remain the US and the Russian Federation because the OSCE is a key forum where their rich relationship unfolds and for specific reasons. In Washington, the Helsinki Commission acts as a permanent lobby for the human dimension side of the organization and energizes its role in democratic transitions east and south east of Vienna. The foreign affairs bureaucracy of the MID maintains a complex love-hate relationship with an organization which remains the repository of traditional Russian ambitions to have a common European home where Russia acts on an equal footing with its partners. At the same time it decries it as a tool intruding in the domestic political life of Russia and its friends. The level of attention paid to the OSCE by most EU members is more modest, with the exception of Germany, and this is manifest in the limited amount of time their foreign ministers dedicate to their participation in the annual ministerial meeting in comparison with the regular two-day presence of the Russian foreign minister and the representative of the State department. Similarly, non-EU Western countries pay unequal attention to the OSCE.

East of Vienna the OSCE remains a visible actor, membership of which provides respectability. It serves as a useful window on the world for the countries that are not part of the two bigger organizations, NATO and the EU. Smaller countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia tend to see the OSCE as an important platform for diplomatic presence and influence, and they send their best diplomats to Vienna and use it in an increasingly assertive way. The Kazakh chairmanship was an important moment in the life of the organization, shifting its centre of gravity towards Central Asia and attracting enough attention to make a summit possible. Kazakhstan showed what a remarkable job an emerging power, that is clearly less than perfect in terms of implementing OSCE commitments, can do in steering a complex organization and how this has served its international profile. The Astana summits achieved a remarkable declaration but failed to produce a revival of interest in the organization that would normally have stemmed from the first OSCE summit in eleven years.

Notwithstanding this spectacular moment, the OSCE has developed into a niche organization where different participating states keep their lines of communication open among themselves and promote their own interests while accepting a common Eurasian framework of discussion, cooperation and action in selected areas. This is quite different from the broad umbrella organization for pan-European security that was envisaged in the Charter of Paris although the OSCE remains rooted in the need to associate Russia and increasingly Central Asia with the process of Euro-Atlantic cooperation that has been given the lead in ensuring security in the area. East of Vienna it remains a respected forum and security actor with many field offices. West of Vienna, it is perceived as a junior partner of NATO and the EU and suffers from its association with the cold war heritage. The innovative nature of its cross-dimensional security approach tends to be

forgotten, as well as its potential to serve as a platform for variable geometry cooperation in dealing with new threats and challenges or as an example for other regions. The EU member states and their common institutions have been slow in identifying its potential as a tool for their own foreign and security policy. The Commission all too often looks at the OSCE as an obstacle to the development of its own policies. The cohabitation with the Council of Europe still has to be worked out and the two organizations rarely attempt to look at their respective remits in a coherent and mutually supportive way.

This benign neglect towards the ambitions of the OSCE project will make it difficult in the future to sustain the intense contacts that take place under its aegis in Vienna and elsewhere. In a period of shrinking financial resources the discrepancy between ends and means is starting to show. The OSCE budget has seen zero growth in the course of the last five years and the size of many delegations present in Vienna or sent to many events has been shrinking. Being the Cinderella of European security organizations is an increasingly difficult situation for the OSCE, which relies to a large extent on the drive and determination of its chairmanship to function and remain relevant.

Is the OSCE concept of multidimensional security operative and relevant?

One of the great achievements of the CSCE process was to create consensus on a multidimensional concept of security that binds together all the great declarations adopted in the early 1990s, whose anniversaries were celebrated in the course of 2011. The scope of the human dimension component has been continuously developed and intensified over the years by the collective work of participating states and of the three institutions -- the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner for National Minorities and the Representative for the Freedom of the Media -- present within the organization. This concept has increasingly been adopted in other international fora within the UN family and other organizations to the point where it has become part of abroad consensus. Developments throughout the OSCE area show that the process of democratic transition requires methodical progress in all the domains that are inherent in the OSCE approach and that none can be set aside. There is an intuitive understanding that this also holds true for the new developments outside the region linked to the Arab spring but there the transition is in its early stages.

Yet the concept has remained more of a source of inspiration than a set of guidelines or an articulated policy. The picture is one of contrasts and missed opportunities. The three dimensions remain separated in the institutional structures for debate (the three committees) and in terms of secretariat support and institutions. The second dimension has always been a weak spot in the work of the OSCE, in spite of its crucial importance for fragile societies. The OSCE has been struggling to gain attention from participating states to the yearly priorities promoted by each chairmanship and for the Economic and environmental forum held every year in Prague. It lacks real support from organizations that specialize in economic and environmental issues such as the European Commission.

On the other hand, some unique work takes place within the OSCE family. The work of the HCNM is unique in seeking to create stability and security by addressing political conflicts stemming from ethnic tensions at an early stage. The HCNM works in strict confidentiality and by doing so he can engage with states on matters which are of the highest sensitivity. The secretariat has recently produced a number of studies that analyze the complex economic motivations that drive trafficking activities. It actively participates in the environmental security process (ENVSEC) that has been delivering some pioneering work on relationships between different dimensions of security. The Conflict Prevention Centre has developed a specific capability in the area for

border management which is of great importance for Central Asia. The third dimension is the most original and dynamic within the organizations and has experienced continuous progress in new fields such as tolerance and Roma issues that clearly relate and interact with other dimensions. The field operations carry out outstanding work in keeping as much balance as possible between the three dimensions and combining them in practice but they have to do so in a pragmatic way without presenting their efforts as a coherent and planned approach.

One of the real outcomes of the Corfu process activated by the Greek chairmanship in 2009 was to revive interest in the cross-dimensional concept of security among delegations. The various internal documents that were produced in preparation for the Astana summit bear the imprint of this work. The reaffirmation of the validity of the approach did not lead to any breakthrough in conceptual or practical terms, however.

Cross-dimensional security remains a mix of rhetorical flourish and low-key experimental work. The participating states of the OSCE and its executive structures have not taken advantage of the fact that it has a governance and operational structure which is much more compact than that of the UN. They have not taken the lead in developing new approaches to give substance to the cross-dimensional concept of security and to transform it into policies either to address given problems or in the work of the field offices.

How well has the OSCE been performing in helping to provide lasting security and stability among its 56 participating states?

The OSCE has clearly not lived up to some of the propositions present in the Charter of Paris serving as the central framework for Pan-European security. Circumstances decided otherwise, NATO and the EU enlarged and took the main role as the central organizations for providing stability for a large number of countries emerging from the Soviet embrace. The CSCE, followed by the OSCE, developed into a niche security actor that contributed to the overall task of providing security to the post-cold war greater Europe in a number of complementary ways: by providing a permanent inclusive forum on security in Eurasia for 56 states present on three continents; by supporting conventional arms control treaties and confidence building agreements between them and by taking charge of peace building for some conflicts that merged in the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslav area. All three activities remained vibrant and well supported up to the Istanbul summit which was the occasion for the adoption of the modified CFE Treaty and the Vienna document of 1999 and witnessed serious efforts to address the protracted conflicts which have been put within the OSCE remit (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transdniestria) in spite of the difficult context in Kosovo.

The past decade has proved to be less auspicious for this particular OSCE niche in Pan-European security. Differences in interpretation in the outcome of the discussions in Istanbul made it impossible to have the adapted CFE Treaty ratified with the effect of weakening the arms control framework. The growing Russian resentment towards its status in European security institutions and policymaking concretely manifested itself in the interruption of active cooperation in the CFE Treaty in December of 2007. A great deal of diplomatic capital has been invested in Vienna since to try and overcome both problems, including in the most recent period, without any success so far.

Most seriously, in spite of efforts to solve the South Ossetian conflict by successive chairmanships and of the determined work of the Georgia field mission, a major armed conflict between two OSCE participating states took place in August 2008. This had the effect of damaging the credibility of the OSCE as a crisis management mechanism and causing the loss of its Georgia field mission that was playing an important role in the broader

Caucasus security situation and in the democratic transition in Georgia.

Since the Georgian conflict, the OSCE's role has become more of that of a team player, acting alongside the UN and the EU, which are now more active with regard to the conflicts in which the OSCE used to have the main responsibility. The Geneva talks on future developments on the Georgian issue are jointly hosted by the three organizations and it is the EU that operates a monitoring mission on the ground. This was also the case in Kyrgyzstan in the spring of 2010 following the bloody events around Osh where a troika composed of the three organizations took the lead in promoting mediation and seeking modalities for promoting law and order in the provinces. On the Transnistria issue, individual states, particularly Germany, have been taking initiatives of their own which could limit the scope of the OSCE-run mediation framework. Lastly, one should recognize that, although it is formally linked to the OSCE, the Minsk process is tightly guarded by the three co-chairs which follow their own course and have limited expectations of the OSCE should the peace principles be adopted by the parties and a new phase be initiated.

The OSCE has also become progressively less relevant in the ongoing debate about security issues in Europe. The Forum for security cooperation seeks, with each of its rotating chairs, to identify relevant security topics, including the field of new threats, and to bring outside speakers to its debates. Nonetheless, its profile remains modest on the broader European scene, which pays greater attention to NATO and to non-state conferences such as the Munich security conference. The annual security review conference had a solid cast of speakers in 2011 including the Secretary General of NATO and the US secretary for homeland security, yet it did not lead to practical follow-up actions or significantly impact the resurgent tensions among key players. The activities within the organization with respect to new threats (combating trafficking in human beings, combating terrorism, helping to manage border areas) remain modest because of their limited and disjointed mandates. They serve as support structures for the activity of networks of multiple actors from all backgrounds and for the field offices.

Thus, although the OSCE continues to play a significant residual role in military security and in controlling protracted conflicts that are crucial to stability in greater Europe, the relevance of the organization in the broader security picture is slowly fading. It has not been complemented by a credible role regarding the new threats that affect the participating states. This may reflect the decline in the importance of some of these issues notably arms control and confidence building. But delicate problems remain that have not been solved or are actually worsening. Weaker foundations in the security field damage the overall credibility of the organization and make it less visible.

How effective is the OSCE toolbox in delivering its intended outputs?

Over the years, the OSCE has developed a unique family of instruments that operate in a very decentralized way. The field offices and the institutions are the most remarkable.

Although three field offices have been closed in the recent period (Georgia, Belarus, Croatia), two thirds of the resources of the organization continue to be dedicated to field activities and half of them go to the south east Europe area. Rebalancing this geographic allocation is a very slow process and great difficulties are being experienced in building up the share of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Each field operation has its own priorities and its own profile that reflects the interests and expectations of host countries, support from delegations in Vienna and the ingenuity of each head of mission in steering his or her (regrettably infrequently) ship. In practice the field operations are largely autonomous as long as they retain the support of delegations

on the occasion of the presentation of their yearly reports and the adoption of their budget. The secretary general is expected to make sure that they operate according to the rules of the organization but his authority over them is limited and most heads of missions cultivate direct contacts with key delegations.

In practice, field offices are small project management units that operate a mix of technical assistance programmes and projects focused on development and institution building. In those countries that experience political difficulties, field offices can also wield discreet influence and play a role in seeking to resolve local crises. The activities of field missions in the human dimension field often have to be combined with other activities notably in the field of police training and energy security to ensure the acceptance of the host countries. In south east Europe, the OSCE retains the most extensive network of grass-roots offices particularly in Bosnia and in Kosovo and operates as the eyes and ears of the international community. This is a labour-intensive activity that relies largely on locally contracted personnel and young expatriates who have a high turnover. It has proved very difficult to assess the effectiveness of the activities of field offices because they are not allowed to have more than a yearly horizon and because their objectives are tailored to suit the varied needs of their host countries. Programme budgeting has facilitated better transparency as to where the resources go, and evaluation and audit should provide guarantees that they are spent in the most effective way. It is a fact that missions are jealous of their autonomy and are reluctant to receive guidance from the Director of the CPC in Vienna. The most difficult issue for the field missions is their progressive loss of legitimacy with host countries. The yearly renewal of mission mandates is increasingly difficult, host countries perceiving the closure of their OSCE mission as a sign of their progress towards meeting international standards. In the Balkans they are expected to help create the conditions for EU membership and would therefore become unnecessary once progress has been achieved. Elsewhere there is a suspicion that they are intrusive and unnecessary, particularly when they serve actively as an interlocutor to civil society in opposition to governments.

The autonomous institutions of the OSCE (HCNM, ODIHR, RFOM) are one of its greatest assets because they are allowed to operate according to their mandates with minimum interference from the participating states in some of the most sensitive areas of the OSCE's remit. They have developed specific expertise in their respective fields which are unique among international organizations. ODIHR serves as the evaluation arm of the OSCE when it assesses the conditions for major electoral consultations in the light of the commitments subscribed by participating states and reviews the whole electoral process. It does so throughout the OSCE area, raising delicate issues everywhere. It can exercise its authority in a progressive way, encouraging each state to improve its implementation of democratic commitments over a broad spectrum of issues as it moves from one election to another. This in-depth work is more significant than the 'day after' assessment of the conformity of an election with OSCE standards.

The HCNM, relying on the determination and skills of successive commissioners, has managed to follow key vulnerable groups closely while elaborating a set of good practices and recommendations that can serve as references for national policies. His impact is considerable because his actions are discreet and impartial. The RFOM has a unique capacity to name and shame in the defence of free media and to establish a continuous dialogue with each participating state. Because of the visibility of its statements it is the most exposed of the three and potentially the most vulnerable. These three institutions deliver some of the most effective work for the organization. They represent a unique experiment in the protection of individual rights by independent but state-supported entities in the service of clear values. I believe that the better part of the job of the Secretary General, who is directly exposed to the pressures of participating states, is to help support and protect these

institutions so that they can perform their difficult duties in the best possible way.

There is a fifth component of the OSCE family that could certainly play a more important and positive role: the Parliamentary Assembly. Bringing together legislators from all 56 participating states is a useful complement to a process that remains basically an interstate one. Its regular meetings can do a lot to broaden the visibility and the interest in the work of the whole process. The influential Helsinki Commission in Washington is the most powerful example of this potential. Like other parliamentary assemblies the OSCEPA constantly seeks to broaden its influence and to play a structural role in the work of the organization which is a natural tendency of parliamentary assemblies. What is not helpful, however, is the constant tension that is created by its secretariat in relationships with ODIHR during the process of short-term election observation where the two organizations are meant to work side by side. Similarly, misplaced rhetoric criticizing the undemocratic and opaque nature of the work of the permanent council repeated by chairs of the OSCEPA have revealed a lack of understanding and respect for the specificities of the organization. Successive chairmanships have deployed great efforts in trying to eliminate this discrepancy that damages the overall credibility of the organization but have all failed. It is also a fact that foreign ministries have not always been keen to discuss with their national parliamentarians the problems created by these divisive practices.

Besides its support function for the whole of the organization (Management and Budget, Personnel, Evaluation and Internal Audit, Conference Services), the Vienna-based secretariat is composed of a number of specialized units (the Special representative for combating trafficking in human beings, the Conflict prevention centre, the Coordinator for Economic and environmental affairs, the Strategic police matters unit, and the Anti terrorism unit) that have been given precise mandates and operate in direct contact with the chairmanship and delegations which occasionally seek to micromanage them.

The decentralized nature of the organization therefore combines great advantages and serious shortcomings in terms of its effectiveness. Coherent policy making is made very difficult by the multiplicity of actors each supported by their own lobby. The budgetary process is an occasion for difficult bargaining that goes deep into the work of each institution and unit but fails to provide any detailed guidelines. The overall orientation and priorities within the organization reflect multiple political deals rather than an overall strategy or a set of interconnected policies. In spite of their respectability and autonomy, the institutions themselves are under constant pressure whenever there is a change in leadership or in the course of budget discussions. Needless to say, the best a Secretary General can do in this context is to facilitate, on every occasion, as much coherence and continuity as possible and to help each of the components of the process to perform its mandated tasks. He can exercise a discreet influence over time, but he is not expected to come up with proposals for overall coherence or guidance.

Where is the work of the OSCE heading?

In the continuous debate among themselves, OSCE participating states dwell on the management of protracted, hard security issues and conflicts, but most of their debates are dedicated to issues related to the democratic transition they are experiencing. This field offers a rich variety of topics since the process is proving to be a long and arduous one. Each of the participating states, however different their situation may be, has much to do in order to implement its OSCE commitments. Countries considered to be advanced have to be reminded of their weaknesses often in areas such as freedom of the media, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the protection of minorities. Countries which are less advanced have more basic shortcomings in terms of their handling of human rights cases, institution building and the rule of law. The

peer review that takes place in the permanent council as well as other key meetings (the annual human dimension implementation meeting, the economic forum, the annual security review conference) is quite unique in its scope and openness. In the recent period, it has focused on Belarus as well as Hungary, Kazakhstan and Turkey. This ongoing and open debate draws on the work of the institutions, field offices and secretariat units and is likely to remain at the heart of the organization's work. It is meant to influence the domestic life of the participating states themselves by encouraging them to do better. It is a constant challenge for delegations because reality is often well ahead of any fiction in terms of new developments that affect the values of the OSCE.

Some of these issues emerge from the debates as themes of particular interest for the organization and are further explored in ad hoc meetings initiated by one Participating state or by the Chair. This has been the case with tolerance and non-discrimination which was initially considered only through the prism of anti-Semitism and was progressively broadened to cover discrimination against Muslims, Christians and others. Three special representatives of the chair are tasked with following and reporting on the three modalities of discrimination. This question has been the object of particular interest in the exchanges with Mediterranean partners. It was also one of the priorities of the Kazakh chairmanship based on the specific experience of this country. Asian Partners have provided a flow of topics for discussion since the Madrid ministerial council that tasked the organization to provide support to Afghanistan. Similarly, cyber security is being explored as a new area for in-depth discussions following initiatives by the United States.

The innovation can also come from the work of one of the thematic units within the organization, which makes progress on the basis of one of the tasks it has received. The institutions have proved particularly fertile in this regard. The HCNM has methodically clarified his remit by putting forward a set of new recommendations on how to protect national minorities. The RFOM has diligently clarified the problems arising from the development of electronic media. The special representative on combating trafficking in human beings has explored the economic motives for trafficking. All of them have been drawing on the inputs of networks linking different actors of civil society throughout the OSCE area. The various units dedicated to combating new threats have been cooperating closely with the Secretary General to devise an integrated approach to these threats within the organization that was submitted to the Vilnius ministerial meeting.

Relationships with the Mediterranean and Asian partners have proved to be a source of great stimulation and some disappointments. Following the initiative of the Spanish chairmanship, the partners sit around the same table with other OSCE participating states in all events and are free to voice their concerns. The yearly conferences with each category of partners serve as important venues for exchanges on the respective security problems of each group with the 56. Asian partners brought the issue of Afghan security to the centre of the OSCE's activity, helping to launch a series of projects aimed at contributing thereto by providing joint training for Afghan and central Asian security personnel. Helping to define and implement these projects following the Madrid ministerial meeting was one of the most interesting tasks I was involved in as Secretary General. The thirteen projects that were approved and are being implemented remain a modest endeavour, however. Their effectiveness has been limited by the lack of consensus for the deployment of the OSCE within Afghanistan itself for security and political reasons and one can only hope that the Vilnius ministerial meeting will give this endeavour a new impetus. While the Mediterranean partners have encouraged the 56 to pay more attention to issues of discrimination against Muslims and migrations, it has proved difficult to develop practical cooperation with them. Initial contacts following political changes in Tunisia and Egypt led to only limited initiatives and conversations with Morocco have not yet yielded many results. The Mediterranean

partners therefore do not recognize the OSCE as a possible source of cooperation when it might be most useful.

The OSCE could thus function as a laboratory for ideas in response to the issues of concern that are selected following its debates. Similarly, it could make greater use of the continuous work of its units acting within their mandates. It has a great potential for highlighting important developments and exploring fresh policy proposals because the values that inspire it are central to the dynamics of contemporary societies and of international relations. Is this potential used as effectively as it could be?

This may not be the case. The OSCE has not proved to be very effective in creating links between the ideas it discusses and its current policy. The Arab spring has not provoked an increase in the attention paid to its solid track record and creative work. The OSCE holds a number of significant thematic meetings that bring together its participating states and the NGO community but it lacks a higher profile event that would extend its impact beyond the select group of OSCE experts and reach out to the media. Enhanced visibility would stimulate the discussion and sharpen the focus on a coordinated policy approach. Successive chairs have tried to enhance the brainstorming aspect of the diplomatic discussions by bringing expert advice from NGOs, academia and think tanks into the debate. This has been done in the context of the Corfu process, the Prepcom ahead of the summit and in the post-summit implementation work. But none of these worthy endeavours have so far succeeded in mobilizing the OSCE decision makers around new projects.

Is the governance structure of the OSCE adequate for its ambitions?

Among international organizations, the OSCE is unique in relying on one of its participating states, chosen by consensus by its peers, to steer the life of the organization for a full year. So far the OSCE has managed to find states which are willing to take on this burden which is demanding in terms of resources and political attention. They have been medium to small countries willing to pay a price to enhance their international standing and to punch above their weight for a while. Because of the inevitable accidents of political life, the foreign ministers who campaigned to obtain this prize for their country have never been the ones who had to run the show when the time came to act as chairman in office. There has been a fortunate succession of EU and non-EU countries which allowed a mix of openness and stability. It is, however, becoming increasingly difficult to identify candidates with the right profile and the willingness to run the organization. The Kazakh candidacy took time to be accepted and it raised, for the first time, the question that the chair of the organization could have a problematic record in implementing its key values.

Each chairmanship brings to the organization its own priorities, its own background, its own sensitivities and its own bureaucratic style. The organization adjusts to it as much as it adjusts to the organization. After an ambitious start, the chairmanship is usually confronted with growing difficulties by the middle of the year and is increasingly concerned about delivering a successful ministerial meeting after the summer break. The central task for the chair is to keep the organization working and moving forward by building and preserving consensus among participating states, which can be very fractious and obstinate. Ambassadors who have held the chair are unanimous in saying that this is a demanding job that leaves limited leeway for initiatives. They also admit that the bigger players (the EU, the US and the Russian Federation) play a central role in the life of the organization and that nothing can be achieved without their support while smaller actors are increasingly assertive and willing to use their de facto veto right to push their own interests.

The secretariat plays a variable role in this context. It is a depository for the experience and continuity of the organization and stands ready to assist the chair whenever requested to do so. Some chairs make use of this

and rely on the advice and input of the Secretary General and his team. Others, often because of the close control exercised by the capital, prefer to exercise their prerogatives fully. The weekly meeting between the Secretary General and the chairmanship as well as the Troika meetings help to regulate and smooth out the relationship by ensuring a constant exchange of information that is shared with the secretariat units and the institutions. The Secretary General is expected to adjust to the specific circumstances. His role becomes more central whenever there is a crisis situation because all the resources of the secretariat then have to be mobilized. I experienced memorable moments in chairing ad hoc task forces within the secretariat after the Georgian crisis or in the course of the difficulties that occurred in Kirghizstan throughout 2010. Still, the chairmanship is keen to retain political control over the work of the organization in all circumstances. In six years, I did not meet a chairmanship that was willing to entrust an explicitly political mission to the Secretary General.

So far this governance system has served the organization fairly well. Yet the model may be reaching its limits. The price of flexibility is the lack of precision in the respective responsibilities of multiple operators. Delegations tend to oversee closely the work of the secretariat in Vienna while being more lenient with the other parts of the organization. Their support for the activity of the chairmanship varies according to their immediate concerns. Because the system is so decentralized, the chair does not always attempt to get a grip on all its components and tends to focus on the demanding management of the work in Vienna. It is not easy for ordinary bureaucrats or an opinion maker to understand which of the six possible voices of the OSCE speaks for the organization: the chairman in office, the Secretary General and the three institutions, or the Parliamentary Assembly.

On a different note, one has to admit that it is difficult to ensure continuity in purpose and priorities in an organization that changes its chief manager every year and has to be constantly building consensus for its daily management decisions. Individual countries are increasingly reluctant to take responsibility for an organization that is so demanding and brings little rewards. Successive reform plans have sought to address these weaknesses by putting forward different proposals. A recurrent proposal is to strengthen the Secretary General. This is unlikely to be accepted as long as the central role of the chairmanship remains and as long as the most influential participating states expect to retain an influence in the work of the organization.


Similarly, the recognition of a legal personality for the organization and the discussion of a set of constitutional principles that would resemble a charter are held up for political reasons by key players, which has negative consequences for the effectiveness of the OSCE.

It is unlikely that the existing governance structure of the OSCE will change in the near future because it reflects the ambiguous status of the organization and suits its main players. In a way it is very similar to other arrangements that are used in global governance (climate change negotiations, G 20). These give the country in the chair central responsibility for steering the discussions and rely on a very light secretariat while drawing on independent expert advice in order to produce political recommendations.

All this means that the OSCE will have to continue to function and develop in the future along multiple tracks in a very pragmatic way. It may have to refocus itself on the security-related problems most relevant to its participating states at a given moment and to become more selective in order to adapt to the new circumstances. Its future could hinge on becoming more of a catalyst of semi-formal networks of diversified actors sharing its values and interests. These networks would complement the interstate machinery, which

would be pruned and rationalized. It is uncertain whether it will retain its network of field offices for a long period. Ultimately, there is no substitute for sustained political attention from the key players manifesting itself in the active use of the organization and the promotion of concrete projects supported by resources. The future role and status of the organization will depend on finding a series of motivated chairmanships and on the sustained interests of a few countries with the help of the secretariat and institutions. It will remain a fragile process of choice rather than a stable legal and bureaucratic machine. But this is how it has survived and constantly reinvented itself in the course of the last 40 years. I was proud to be part of this unique process for two terms and to meet some remarkable people, from all backgrounds. The future of the OSCE depends on them and on all of us.





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