

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.

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 redundant because it was 'too late'.

The question of who exactly started the unprecedented violence and rioting in the south remains unanswered so far and an independent investigation should clarify this issue. It is also clear that the violence was well organized by people who aimed to ignite the tensions between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities. But it remains unclear who these people are. Theories of a 'spontaneous explosion' of inter-ethnic rivalries are not considered to be realistic, as the tensions which did exist were definitely not of a nature that people were willing to kill each other. Possible culprits include local gangs settling debts, Uzbek and Kyrgyz nationalists, mercenaries and diehard supporters of the ousted President Bakiev who aimed to undermine the new administration in the country. It is also clear that parts of the Kyrgyz security apparatus were involved in the turmoil, although it remains an open question who gave them the orders. It is also clear that the security forces became involved in serious violations of the rights of Uzbeks after the turmoil. Well-known organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group have issued appalling reports as a result of their investigations. However, such reports at the same time have clearly resulted in a growing reluctance among Kyrgyz authorities to allow international investigators into the country. In particular, the police seem to be against any outside 'interference', probably scared of further revelations of their lack of professionalism and wrongdoings.

The OSCE is clearly the 'victim' of this growing hesitance about international involvement and support. Although the Kyrgyz authorities requested international intervention and support from the beginning, leading to an OSCE decision in July to dispatch a Police Advisory Group (PAG) of 52 officers to the south of the country, there is still no final agreement from Bishkek to welcome the group. In particular the Kyrgyz security bodies seem to be against its deployment. This is actually a rather painful development, as Kyrgyzstan has been the biggest beneficiary of police assistance from the OSCE since 2003. The organization has helped the country to set up, equip and train riot police squads in Osh and Bishkek in order to prevent a repetition of the notorious Aksy events of 2002, when several human rights defenders were killed during a demonstration in the south. But not much has been heard about these riot police units in the spring. In contrast, Bakiev explicitly ordered the security forces to open fire on demonstrators in the streets of Bishkek, exactly the opposite of what the OSCE had been trying to tell the Kyrgyz how to act in riot situations. Major efforts have also been undertaken to assist the Kyrgyz in introducing community policing in the country, but the results of these efforts can

hardly be seen. In the south of the country the OSCE HCNM has conducted its own police training programme on inter-ethnic relations, but in 2010 the police are being accused of serious violations of the rights of these ethnic minorities. So, in a way, Kyrgyzstan presents a painful mirror to the OSCE in the sense that its biggest police assistance programme in the whole region did not bring the results that were aimed at.

Whether the newly created PAG will be deployed in practice remains to be seen. Its head will be the Swiss diplomat Markus Mueller who has been a highly respected head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek for several years. Opposition against the OSCE deployment does not only come from Kyrgyz security forces, but also politicians and some NGOs are against it. According to their reasoning, the group is too small to make any difference, it would infringe Kyrgyzstan's sovereignty and it might even lead to more instability. According to the former Prime Minister Felix Kulov and now one of the leaders of a political party, Osh law-enforcement structures will be more concerned with guarding the unarmed 'foreigners' than responding to the situation on the ground. In any case, popular resistance against the OSCE group seems to be growing and has now even resulted in opposition within the new administration which had earlier requested such assistance. The fact that parliamentary elections will take place in October has undoubtedly also played a role in this process of growing reluctance towards OSCE aid in Kyrgyzstan, as the issue has become totally politicized.


2. OSCE Summit meeting scheduled for December 2010

After more than 11 years with only meetings of the Ministerial Council, the OSCE will hold a summit meeting on 1-2 December this year. The summit will take place in the Kazakh capital Astana. Although it remained uncertain until the end, finally the informal Ministerial in Almaty on July 16-17 took this decision after the US government finally decided to give its consent. The last OSCE Summit meeting took place in Istanbul, Turkey, in November 1999. According to the official OSCE rules, a summit should take place every two years, but the decline in the OSCE's political significance and, therefore, the lack of a really substantial agenda made it virtually impossible to organize such meetings. This was also reflected in the composition of the annual Ministerials which at the beginning of this century also had great difficulties in attracting the foreign ministers of the most important OSCE countries. Many countries decided just to send lower-level representatives for quite a few years. With the deterioration in the East-West climate and the Russian-initiated debate on a new security architecture/treaty, it was interesting to observe that the OSCE Ministerials also succeeded in bringing more ministers together. And since the Greek Chairmanship last year, an annual 'informal' Ministerial is being organized in the summer, this year in Almaty, with a considerable number of ministers showing up. The first informal Ministerial last year launched the so-called Corfu Process. In some way or another all this reflects the growing significance of the OSCE as a political forum for dialogue once again. At the same time it reflects the 'warming up' of Russian-American relations which can be observed in recent times. Officially an OSCE Summit should be preceded by a long review conference which focuses on debating the implementation of OSCE commitments in its three dimensions. Because of the lack of time due to the late decision to organize a summit meeting, this review conference is now planned in three phases in Warsaw, Vienna and Astana from September to November.

The Kyrgyz crisis is expected to be a central issue at the summit. Not surprisingly this crisis has put the Central-Asian problems high on the OSCE agenda and the fact that Kazakhstan happened to be the Chairman-in-Office played an important role as well. But the most important issue will undoubtedly be the Russian-initiated Corfu Process with the Russian draft treaty on European security. As the Kazakh Chairman-in-Office, the Kazakh State Secretary and Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabaev, stated after the informal Ministerial in Almaty in July:

a key topic for the summit will be the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian community 'shaping a united and indivisible security space, free of dividing lines and different levels of security'. Whether this will lead to drastic changes in the way the OSCE is functioning remains to be seen. Other topics for the summit include reconfirming States' commitments; reinforcing the OSCE's institutional foundation and its transformation into a fully-fledged international organization; strengthening arms control; enhancing the OSCE toolbox in all three dimensions of early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation; joint development of ways to peacefully settle protracted conflicts; and increased attention to countering transnational threats. The CiO also said that boosting OSCE engagement, within its mandate, in international efforts to stabilize and reconstruct Afghanistan, countering economic challenges in the post-crisis period, strengthening the OSCE's potential to counteract challenges in the human dimension and enhancing the OSCE institutions' ability to monitor implementation would also be discussed. From this list it becomes clear that security issues will dominate the summit agenda, not human rights. This should not come as a surprise in view of Kazakhstan's ongoing problems in this area, including the imprisonment of well-known human rights defenders and journalists on dubious grounds.

The fact that the final decision on organizing the summit meeting was only taken in mid July implies that very limited time has been left for properly preparing the meeting and the decisions to be considered at the summit. In a way it is a risky gamble, as a failure to produce substantive results will certainly have negative consequences for the organization as a whole. But it is also clear that Kazakhstan must be very satisfied. Not only did the country acquire the OSCE Chairmanship after protracted and sensitive negotiations, it has now also fulfilled its wish to have a summit meeting in Astana. Both developments put the Central-Asian problems high on the international agenda and simply that is already an important achievement. Kazakhstan definitely demonstrates effective and skilful diplomacy.



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