

OSCE Chronicle: New OSCE Chairman-in-Office Faces Daunting Task

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DOI: [10.1163/187502309787858066](https://doi.org/10.1163/187502309787858066)

1. Greece: New Chairman-in-Office for 2009

As of the 1st of January 2009 Greece has taken over the chairmanship of the OSCE from outgoing chair Finland. This is hardly an enviable position in view of the increasing security problems in the Eurasian region as Greece was immediately confronted with a new crisis as a result of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict about gas deliveries. When Russia cut gas deliveries to the Ukraine on the 1st of January, its Western neighbours in Central Europe and the Balkans were also hit. Gas deliveries to countries like Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic also diminished, leading to strong demands from the Czech Republic (which took over the EU Presidency in January) and the EU Commission to resume full deliveries immediately. Within days the Russians completely closed the gas pipelines running through the Ukraine, leading to serious shortages in several EU countries. (At the time of this writing, the outcome of the conflict was still uncertain.)

Finland has had a difficult time as OSCE Chairman, faced in particular with the devastating Georgian-Russian war in August and its serious political fallout. One of the consequences is that the long-standing and rather successful OSCE Mission in Georgia has to close down in the first months of 2009 because the Russian Federation refused its consent to prolong its mandate in December of last year. Although the Finnish Foreign Minister, Alexander Stubb, has been a very active and skilful OSCE Chairman, it cannot be denied that 2008 showed serious further weakening of the overall importance of the organization, again demonstrated by the lack of consensus on a concluding document at the Helsinki Ministerial in December of last year.

Whether Greece will experience a smoother chairmanship is doubtful. The global economic crisis may lead to serious political problems within and between certain OSCE countries. The economic decline, particularly in Russia in the last months of 2008 is dramatic and several observers expect that this may lead to political instability. And there is no sign that Moscow intends to change its highly assertive, sometimes aggressive policy towards the OSCE and the Western countries which may undermine what has been left of the OSCE's effectiveness. Moreover, Greece starts its chairmanship with serious political problems in its own country, where massive demonstrations against the sitting government have almost paralyzed the country. The domestic political problems in Greece may have a negative impact on its OSCE chairmanship.

2. Helsinki Ministerial Council Meeting Again Fails to Adopt Political Declaration

'The spirit of Helsinki has revitalized the OSCE, and the meeting of foreign ministers gave new impetus to discussions on European security challenges', said the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb, at the close of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Helsinki on 5 December last year. This was nice diplomatic jargon aimed at upholding the image of at least some progress. In reality, very little progress has been made on virtually all major problems in the OSCE area, also reflected in the fact that the Council again failed to adopt a final political declaration due to a lack of consensus. One of the main successes of the Council meeting was that this time a record 50 foreign ministers attended the meeting, whereas in the past only a very limited number showed up, instead sending less high-ranking officials. This 'success', however, demonstrates the fact that there are very serious political problems on the table. Still, no substantial progress could be achieved.

One of the main issues, strongly promoted by Moscow, was a draft decision to convene an OSCE Summit meeting in 2009 in order to discuss the Eurasian 'security architecture'. This was met with strong opposition from many Western countries which don't see any reason for a summit meeting on that topic. The outcome,

therefore, was that Greece, as new Chairman-in-Office, may convene some kind of high-level meeting this year in order to discuss the issue further.

The Ministerial adopted a total of thirteen more specific decisions with rather limited practical significance, including a statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. They welcomed the 'constructive and positive momentum in the peace process for the political settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict', and encouraged the sides to intensify negotiations. The foreign ministers also agreed to enhance OSCE efforts to improve the situation of Roma and Sinti, and to combat trafficking in human beings. Other decisions concerned, among other issues, small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, as well as countering terrorism. The Greek chairmanship was also tasked to continue working on a legal framework for the, thus far, strictly political OSCE. In spite of its disappointing outcome, the Council meeting provided ample opportunity to express strong political opinions about the major problems in the OSCE area and, therefore, served as a barometer of the poor political weather within the organization.

3. OSCE Mission in Georgia Closed Down

Although the Finnish OSCE Chair has been doing its utmost, up to the very last moment, to find some kind of consensus about the prolongation of the mandate for the OSCE Mission in Georgia, including a technical prolongation for a couple of months in order to allow for further negotiations, the Russian Federation effectively blocked any progress with the result that the OSCE Mission in Georgia will have to close down after 16 years. In the first months of 2009, all work and logistical issues will be wrapped up. The Mission has around 200 international and local staff members.

This is another victim of the Russian-Georgian war of August last year, followed by the unilateral Russian recognition of South-Ossetia and Abkhazia as 'independent states', even though many observers label it a Russian annexation. Although not a single OSCE state has followed the Russian recognition, not even one of its closest allies, Moscow remained firm that the OSCE has to accept, formally or informally, the two break-away republics as independent countries. Therefore, an extension of the mandate of the Mission in Georgia which covered both Georgian break-away regions was not acceptable to the Russians. They would however, welcome the establishment of a new OSCE Mission in South- Ossetia, but on conditions which are unacceptable to other OSCE states, as it would basically recognize the dismemberment of the Georgian territory.

It is now hoped and expected that the EU may fill the gap by taking over some of the functions of the OSCE Mission. Since the 1st of October last year, the EU has a number of monitors (the EU Monitoring Mission or EUMM) in place who are monitoring the 'frontline' between Georgia proper and its breakaway regions. Unfortunately, the monitors are not allowed inside South-Ossetia and Abkhazia. They are, therefore, unable to monitor the 'ethnic cleansing' which, according to many independent observers, has resulted in nearly all ethnic Georgians in South- Ossetia being expelled and their villages destroyed.

The EUMM consists of around 350 unarmed, uniformed observers, dispatched by almost all EU member states. Its first mandate is for one year, although in the present circumstances it is likely to be extended. Its main task is to monitor the proper implementation of the French-brokered armistice between Russia and Georgia which, in practice, means to monitor the withdrawal of Russian troops to positions they had before the August war and the safe return of internally displaced persons to the disputed areas. Russia makes access to both breakaway regions dependent upon negotiations with the 'independent' authorities in South-Ossetia and

Abkhazia which is a diplomatic trap that may lead to de facto recognition of the new realities in the region with the result that the territories remain closed to the EUMM monitors.

In the present political climate, which comes close to a new Cold War between Russia and the West, the so-called cooperative security concept of the OSCE with consensus-based decision-making has increasingly become a blockade for the organization to perform its security functions properly.

4. Cosmetic Progress on the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The dispute about the status of Nagorno-Karabakh has been on the OSCE agenda since the beginning of the 1990s and was one of the first post-Soviet conflicts the organization got involved in when the newly independent states Armenia and Azerbaijan joined the then CSCE as independent states in 1992. In February 1992, a very first rapporteur mission was dispatched to the region to get acquainted with the situation and to explore possible solutions. It eventually resulted in the so-called Minsk process, the city where an international peace conference would convene for a final solution of the dispute. That conference never took place, as the conflicting parties couldn't come to terms. Instead a 'peace process' which became known as the Minsk process developed in which, in the 16 years since its start, never produced concrete results. The fact that the 1994 brokered armistice survived amidst the ongoing political tensions might be considered a positive result of this OSCE effort.

In autumn last year the world was surprised with the announcement that the presidents of the two countries in the dispute (Armenia and Azerbaijan) signed a document which was sold to the mass media as a major step forward in the conflict. The agreement concerned a document that was the outcome of a meeting, organized by the Russian president, Medvedev, at his residence in Moscow. In a sense this was a success story, as this was the very first time that the leaders of both countries signed a document regarding the conflict since 1994. However, as its contents are rather vague, it might rather be considered a gesture of politeness by the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents to their host who was eager to restore the Russian reputation in the world after its brief war with Georgia in August than as a real breakthrough in solving this long-lasting conflict. It is obvious that the Russian-Georgian war put this event in the proper context, as both countries involved in the dispute turned out to be extremely vulnerable. During and shortly after the conflict Azerbaijan lost a major channel for its oil through Georgia to the Black Sea, resulting in a very substantial loss in income. At the same time Armenia also became a victim, as its main land links to the outside world were blocked. This may have led to the conviction in both countries that a solution to their ongoing conflict is direly needed, as well as to avoid an outbreak of another war among them. Although the conflict is seen as 'frozen', it has still cost the lives of a few dozens Armenians and Azeri in various incidents along the frontline last year.

The document, signed in Moscow, states that both parties in the dispute remain committed to ongoing negotiations in the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. The last negotiations in this framework took place in Madrid in November, resulting in the so-called Madrid document which contains the 'basic principles' for a solution to the dispute. A former presidential foreign policy advisor in Azerbaijan called the document a 'manoeuvre by Russia designed to demonstrate its importance to the West. But the gesture turned out to be an empty one as the result was a document that had no weight and means nothing'.¹

1 Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Caucasus Reporting Service No. 467.

Although it seemed that Russia would take over the lead in the negotiations about this frozen conflict, in fact it confirmed the continuing relevance of the Minsk Group. This was also confirmed by the co-chairs of the Group (specially appointed ambassadors from the USA, Russia and France) on 6 November, a few days after the Moscow summit during a meeting with the press in Vienna. All three ambassadors expressed a ‘cautious’ optimism about the future of the ongoing negotiations.





This article was published by the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM).

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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