

The OSCE Chairmanship: Captain or Figurehead?

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There is an impression, held not least by a few in-coming Chairmen-in-Office, that the OSCE Chairmanship puts a country in charge of the northern hemisphere for a year. Yet the powers of the Chairmanship are circumscribed by its mandate as well as the constraints of building consensus among 56 countries, some of them very powerful. This begs the question, is the Chairman-in-Office the captain of the OSCE ship for one year, or just a figurehead?

In effect, the OSCE has a dual leadership: a Chairmanship that rotates every year, and a Secretary General, appointed for three years with the possibility of a second term.¹ The Chairmanship's role is considered political, whereas the Secretary General is the chief administrative officer. In short, the latter is seen as the secretary, while the former is regarded as the general.

Yet the Chairman's political power is largely a myth. The Chairmanship seldom takes a political decision on its own: decisions within the OSCE are taken by consensus. In line with decision 8 of the Porto Ministerial of 2002² — which clearly defines the possibilities and limitations of the Chairmanship — the Chairmanship must ensure that 'its actions are not inconsistent with positions agreed by all the participating States'. It is merely the first among equals for a year.

The Chairmanship has the authority to make appointments, for example heads of Mission. But even here, steps have been taken of late to increase professionalism and transparency in the selection process, with a greater role for the Permanent Council and the Secretariat. The Troika (past and future Chairmen) are also involved in the process. When appointing a personal representative, the Chairmanship-in-Office (according to the Porto decision) shall consult with the participating States in advance. Senior appointments in the Secretariat and Institutions are up to the heads of the respective institutions, in consultation with the Chairmanship, not the other way around. The Chairmanship appoints a Special Co-ordinator for short-term election observation missions on the suggestion of the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. The Director of ODIHR appoints the head of the long-term observation mission. In short, all across the board, the Chairmanship's powers of appointment are limited.

Some would say that the Chairman-in-Office is the public face of the OSCE for a year. While the Foreign Minister of the country holding the Chairmanship certainly relishes the limelight, he or she is not supposed to freelance, or to express national positions while wearing the OSCE hat. When issuing public statements, Chairmen-in-Office are supposed to abide by a decision of the Permanent Council³ that says 'formal OSCE positions are expressed in decisions, statements and documents adopted by the decision-making bodies on the basis of consensus'. Statements of the CiO made in their national or personal capacity must be clearly identified as such. If the Chairmanship abuses this practice (which has occurred in the past), powerful participating States are usually quick to react.

To ensure that the Chairmanship stays on message and represents the views of the Organization as a whole, it is assisted by the Press and Public Information Section of the OSCE Secretariat. In some cases (for example Slovenia in 2005), the CiO has used the OSCE Spokesperson as his Spokesman for all OSCE matters, and has drawn heavily on the Secretariat for drafting speeches, articles and other public statements. In other cases

1 See Jan Kubis, Dual leadership: dysfunctional or mutually supportive?, Helsinki Monitor, Vol. 16:3, pp. 218-221.

2 Decision No. 8, Role of the OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office, Porto 2002, (MC(10).DEC/8)

3 Decision No. 485, OSCE Statements and Public Information, PC.DEC/485, 28 June 2002

(like the Netherlands in 2003 and Belgium in 2006) the Chairmanship has done its own thing, seldom drawing on the support of the Secretariat.

Indeed, some Chairmanships have jealously guarded their leadership role and treated the Secretariat (and Secretary General) as either benign amateurs or malign meddlers. Failure to share information and cooperate between the political and executive arms of the Organization inevitably leads to failure. Since a great deal of the Organization's daily business is operational, and coordinated either by specialized units of the Secretariat or the Conflict Prevention Centre, there must be effective burden sharing between the Chairmanship and the Secretariat in order for the Organization to be efficient.

More by circumstance than by design, this is a lesson that has been learned by Chairmanships from countries with more limited capacity. Bulgaria, Romania and Slovenia, for example, had relatively small Chairmanship teams and limited resources compared to, say, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway or Spain. They therefore drew heavily on the Secretariat which enabled them to focus more on the core tasks of negotiating and consensus-building. In the end, although expectations were not high about what they could achieve, they proved rather effective at the helm.

To improve coordination, some Chairmanships have embedded members of their team in OSCE institutions, field operations or the Secretariat. This has been useful in some cases, not least to provide on-the-job training to the staff member concerned. But it should not be seen as an exclusive channel of communication that circumvents direct contacts between the Chairmanship and senior staff of the institutions concerned. Otherwise the individual involved may come to be regarded either as a Trojan Horse, or as going native, in which case he or she loses the confidence of one or both of his or her key interlocutors. Rather than relying on individuals, it is more important to establish effective working modalities and clear channels of communication so that the Chairmanship receives timely reporting, and issues clear instructions.

One place where the Chairmanship has considerable power is in chairing the Advisory Committee on Management and Finance. In the OSCE — like elsewhere— money is power. Programmatic activities are decided by the budget. Control the purse strings, and you control the political direction of the Organization. It is therefore important to have a bright light chairing the Committee, and to use the Unified Budget as the core management tool for programming, implementing, reporting and evaluating the operational activities of the Organization.

However, even (or especially) here the focus should be on continuity and strategic planning rather than a one year cycle. That is why it is important to involve the Secretariat and Troika (or now the Quintet countries) in the budget process.

To use the naval analogy again, the Chairmanship does not need to bring a whole new crew on board the OSCE ship every year, nor does it need to plot a new course. The charts and instruments are provided by the participating States, and the crew is made up of staff in OSCE field operations, institutions and the Secretariat. It simply needs to keep the ship on course — especially in choppy waters. Indeed, Chairmanships are defined by their ability to cope with stormy weather. These occasions distinguish the captains from the figureheads.

The best planning can not prepare a Chairmanship for the eruption of a crisis on its watch. Almost inevitably, something happens during the year that puts all other initiatives on the back burner. The Hungarian


Chairmanship had to react quickly to developments in Chechnya in 1995. Switzerland's Chairmanship (1996) was defined by the crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Under Polish leadership (1998), the OSCE became heavily engaged on the ground in Kosovo. At the beginning of its well-prepared Chairmanship (1999), Norway had to scramble to withdraw the more than 1000 members of the Kosovo Verification Mission. Slovenia (2005) had to deal with revolutions in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Finland's able Chairmanship (2008) may be regarded as a failure — despite its best efforts— because of its handling of the crisis in South Ossetia and the closure of the OSCE Mission to Georgia.

Bearing in mind this experience and the realities of the Chairmanship, Kazakhstan — and other countries taking on the task of Chairing the OSCE — would be well advised to keep the following points in mind. Prepare well in advance, but do not raise expectations about what you hope to achieve. If you want to focus on a particular theme or region, just pick one, not a whole bunch — and ensure that there is continuity so that the momentum does not die with the end of your Chairmanship. Consider yourself as first among equals. Ensure effective communication: within the Chairmanship team; between the Chairmanship, institutions, and field operations; and among all participating States (not just the informal Troika of the EU, US and Russia). Draw on the support of the Secretariat. Spread the sense of ownership so that everyone is pulling in the same direction. As a former Chairman of the Permanent Council once said, quoting American President Dwight Eisenhower, 'leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it'.

Last but not least, expect the unexpected. Every Chairmanship begins the year by hoping to thaw a frozen conflict (too often by re-inventing the wheel). Diplomatic processes take time, and do not conform to the Chairmanship's calendar of wanting to pull off a major diplomatic success by the end-of-year Ministerial meeting. Better to keep those processes moving forward slowly but surely, than having to troubleshoot a hot conflict.

The OSCE is more than a forum for political dialogue. In the past fifteen years it has evolved into a highly operational organization. In order for it to be effective, it needs more dynamic political engagement — the type of stimulus that foreign ministers (Chairmen-in-Office/Troika) can give it. At the same time, it needs capable leadership and management in the Secretariat, institutions, and field operations. This is something a Chairmanship can influence by appointments, coordination, and accountability, but there is no need — nor is it possible — for a Chairmanship to think that it can take over the running of the Organization for a year.

The OSCE works when it is left to get on with the jobs for which it was designed: preventing conflict, building confidence, facilitating dialogue, and helping states live up to their commitments. An able captain should take the OSCE rudder with a degree of humility — that he or she, with all hands on deck, can navigate the vessel, but can not control the elements.



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