

Observations on an OSCE Chairmanship: Intentions, Challenges, and Outcomes

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In 2008, the OSCE Chairmanship was held by Finland. By then, the years when the Organization was able to grow institutionally, develop ambitious substantive agendas and the participating States were able to agree on important political commitments were over. In the early 2000s, this was replaced by difficulties in moving forward in the Organization. By 2008 the Organization could barely agree on each year's budget let alone on major substantive political declarations or commitments. The aim of the Finnish Chairmanship was therefore to go back to the basics by drawing from the joint value-base that brought about ambitious OSCE-wide commitments on all three dimensions during the 1990s.

The three objectives for the Finnish Chairmanship, continuity, coherence and co-operation, seem to reflect the characteristics of the Finnish way of working: practical, operational, dialogue-driven, no-nonsense. The rationale behind the three objectives was to bring the Organization back to business by emphasizing its strong foundation based on joint values and commitments and by focusing on cooperation and issues that can be agreed on, in order to get over disagreements on other issues. The objectives, in particular continuity, also included a hint to those that could be considered, deliberately on due to short-term self-interests, to work for undermining the commitments.

The political direction for the OSCE is provided by the Chairmanship that is held by a participating State during a set time. The Chairmanship is led by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, the Foreign Minister of that State. There is no automatic rotation, but the Chairmanship is agreed on by a Ministerial Council Meeting, when a decision can be reached. The Ministerial Council of 2007 held in Madrid under the Spanish Chairmanship decided that the future Chairmanships will be held by Greece in 2009, Kazakhstan in 2010 and Lithuania in 2011.

The previous and succeeding Chairmen-in-Office assist the ongoing Chairmanship through the Troika mechanism, which the three of them constitute. In practice however, the Troika format does not bear much political importance, even though it can provide the Chairmanship some political support. The previous Chairmanship rarely has much interest in leading the Organization, nor does it have a genuine possibility to influence the ongoing one. The succeeding Chairmanship is often interested with varying focus. Some future Chairmanships are diligently building up their Chairmanship teams in advance in the capital and at the Vienna Permanent Representation to the OSCE. Some are viewing it with impatience and considering how they can do the job better than the ongoing one. And there might also be those, who are eagerly planning for the pursuance of their own national interests through the one-year leadership of a major global security organization.

The Chairmanship structure normally includes a reinforced presence in the capital in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. In Finland's case, the core was the 12-member Task Force, which was responsible for the substantive coordination of the OSCE Chairmanship tasks and priorities. It was also in charge of the preparation of any OSCE meetings, such as the Ministerial Meeting. Of course the cabinet of the Chairman-in-Office as well as the relevant line-departments of the Ministry bear a role in the substantive OSCE work that their Foreign Minister is leading. The Permanent Mission of Finland in Vienna was substantially strengthened for the Chairmanship obligations, in fact, the mission in Vienna is in the centre of the work during the Chairmanship, as they are reachable almost at all times directly by the permanent OSCE delegations of all other 55 participating States. In addition, the Chairman-in-Office normally appoints Special or Personal Representatives or Envoys to assist with particularly challenging tasks, where there is a need for an experienced hand to lead negotiations or an assessment processes for example. The Finnish Chairman-in-Office appointed two Special Envoys, one for the issues in Central Asia and Caucasus, and another one to look at any election-related issues, such as the election observations. In addition, several earlier Personal/Special Representatives such as for tolerance or

combating trafficking continued in their roles.

The Finnish Chairmanship also seconded three advisers for liaison functions in three locations of the OSCE, at the Secretary-General's office, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM). In addition, a Finnish diplomat started as the Head of Mission at the OSCE's Georgia Mission, which was not directly connected with the Chairmanship role. The rationale behind such secondments to the OSCE institutions was to be better informed on the work, policy and operational decisions of these important organs and to be able to better benefit, at the Chairmanship level, from the expertise of the Institutions rather than to steer the decision making process.

The role of the OSCE Chairmanship is to provide the organisation with the political leadership and oversee the activities of the Organization in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation. Its role is to coordinate and guide the OSCE institutions and the OSCE crisis management activities. The Chairman-in-Office is also responsible for the external representation of the Organization. The Chairmanship is therefore giving direction to the political work of the organization. As the head of the largest regional security Organization, working to promote comprehensive security, the challenges of an OSCE Chairmanship is indeed manifold. When the 56 participating States agree on future Chairmanships, they obviously have different perceptions on what constitutes a good Chairmanship. Ultimately of course, a good Chairmanship should aim to promote, in good will, the interests of the Organization as a whole, and not in any way seek to drive it into the ground. Even if neutrality or total impartiality cannot be demanded from the Chairmanship as, after all, most of the 56 participating States do belong to one political camp or another, when steering the Organization, the Chairmanship is expected to work for the interest of the community of the States as a whole, and not just for one group. Efforts towards dialogue and cooperation are most needed, as are sincere efforts to find the smallest common denominator on important issues.

It is difficult to get honest inside knowledge on what constitutes the determining factors for decisions on which State will hold a future Chairmanship. A determining feature is of course whether the State is considered to have implemented the OSCE commitments signed by all participating States. The majority of the OSCE participating States hardly want the political direction of the Organization to be set by a country that does not bother to implement, or even endorse the commitments on the three dimensions, including, most importantly, the Human Dimension that were so difficultly agreed upon by the 56 member States.

It is highly likely that whether or not a State supports the 'West' or the 'East' of Vienna will carry some importance in obtaining the Chairmanship. After all, all previous Chairmanships represented States that, as of now, are considered to be 'West' of Vienna (the 'west' not being merely a geographic term but rather implying that the countries are close to the Western European integration or share 'Western values'). Since 1991 the Chairmanships are in reverse order: Spain, Belgium, Slovenia, Bulgaria, The Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Austria, Norway, Poland, Denmark, Switzerland, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, Czechoslovakia, Germany.

However, those who lock themselves into this dichotomy are deceiving themselves. Of course, in case the terms 'West and East' are the definitions to describe either those who are (relatively) honestly seeking to fulfil the basic principles of a state based on democracy, rule of law and protection of human rights, or those, who have created their own interpretations for these values, then clearly most of the 'West' would prefer to see a State from their side to chair an Organization committed to these principles. Some of the 'East' might of course consider the mentioned values and principles only as sidesteps to the *raison d'être* of the Organisation, which

according to them should rather be a greater overall security instrument without focusing on 'soft' issues such as human rights or a forum for diplomatic negotiations between States locked in cold-war-type positions. This thinking has seemed to re-emerge among some of the Organization's participating States in the last few years. This clearly would give a different perspective to who can lead the Organization, and with what agenda.

Regardless of whether the Chairmanship's sincere priority is, as should be hoped for, to find a smallest common denominator in the sphere of human dimension commitments or care for global security interests locked in frozen positions, the Chairmanship State should obviously not be seen to openly promote its national or other self-interests. Whether any of the previous Chairmanships tried this is not openly documented, but any clear or hard-handed effort to do so would quickly bring the Organization to a halt. Most participating States would simply use any mechanisms available to stop the work of the Organization rather than going in the wrong direction. Of course, the Chairmanship often does raise their favourite issues and priorities they would like to see getting a higher claim organisation-wide or even globally. Such priorities are normally within the human dimension or politico-military issues. It is also popular for each Chairmanship to seek to find solutions to frozen conflicts, or at least to place them high on the agenda. But whether pure national interests can actively and successfully be pursued through the Chairmanship is highly unlikely.

What is the relationship between the Chairmanship and the OSCE Institutions? Can the Chairmanship use the Institutions as its tool? All OSCE institutions – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Representative for the Freedom of the Media, High Commissioner on National Minorities as well as the Parliamentary Assembly – enjoy a high degree of independence. While their budget is adopted by the 56 participating States, there is no mechanism for any participating State to exercise direct influence over the Institutions. The Chairmanship, as the political leadership, can request the Institutions to carry out assignments or to discuss some of the more operational aspects done by them. However, to order any of the Institutions to act in a way they are not willing to do, would not be beneficial for the Organization or the Chairmanship in the long or short-run. Previously, there are no examples of a Chairmanship seeking to override the independence of an institution, at least not ones that have been visibly successful in any way.

What are the conclusions at the end of the Finnish Chairmanship? Was the Chairmanship able to bring the Organization forward towards the spelled out objectives and to foster continuity, coherence and cooperation? The challenges seemed comprehensive already at the outset. Some of the Chairmanship agenda was disrupted by developments on the East-West discourse that seemed to move with its own weight. As the year passed on the dichotomy deepened.

First of all, there was a major delay, yet again, in getting the Organization's budget adopted. The decision of the Russian Federation not to let ODIHR election observers follow the March 2008 presidential elections, following the apparent fall-out between the ODIHR and the Russian authorities was not totally unpredictable. It set the tone for the Chairmanship year, and the division between the fulfilment of the human dimension commitments by the East and West, even if it was followed by efforts by the Chairmanship to create space for all the participating States to discuss the principles and operational implementation of the election observation. The Chairmanship did its best to create an atmosphere of compromise, inclusiveness of all participating States in the work of the OSCE and good will. Whatever goodwill was created over the first half of 2008 disappeared quickly after the events of the 7th and 8th of August. The armies of Georgia, the Russian Federation, and the various military groups in South-Ossetia clashed, creating a wave of IDPs and hundreds of dead. It became clear that the crisis mode of the Organization which Finland had tried to avoid by going 'back

to basics,' was back on the table.

Just a few days after the escalation of hostilities in South-Ossetia turned into a full-blown war, the Chairman-in-Office, Minister Stubb got personally involved in seeking a solution to the war. He travelled to Georgia together with the Head of the EU Presidency and worked with the parties towards agreeing on a ceasefire. The Chairmanship also pushed for the OSCE to urgently send 100 military monitors into the area to monitor the ceasefire and humanitarian situation, in addition to the eight monitors already based on the OSCE Mission. While the OSCE was able to agree on the 100 observers in principle, it only agreed to deploy 20 of them. Even these did not have the mandate to go into the areas most in need of impartial observation, namely South Ossetia where most Georgians had escaped from and which was occupied by Russian Federation forces together with the South Ossetian troops. The closest to South Ossetia the monitors could get was to 'areas adjacent to South Ossetia' in Georgia.

By mid-September, the Chairmanship acknowledged that the deployment of the remaining monitors did not seem realistic, as no political agreement was in sight. Since even the eight previous observers were no longer allowed to enter South Ossetia, the Organization could not monitor the humanitarian or human rights situation there. During the autumn months however, the ODIHR and High Commissioner on National Minorities sent experts into South Ossetia based on a request by the Chairmanship. The findings of both institutions were damning: severe human rights violations had taken place during and after the hostilities, and massive displacement was still effectively being enforced. The Organization could in practice do little or nothing to stop or alleviate the suffering.

During the remaining months of the Chairmanship, the Chair did get involved in the Geneva discussions, which intended to find solutions for stability and a return of refugees to Georgia. However, at the end of 2008, the OSCE could not reach a decision on the continuation of the OSCE Georgia Mission's mandate, as the Russian Federation demanded that a separate full-mandated OSCE Mission be created in South Ossetia, which it had already recognised as an independent state. By the end of 2008, it seems that the OSCE Mission in Georgia will be closed in the first weeks of 2009.

The OSCE Ministerial Council was held in Helsinki in early December 2008. Even as the situation looked dire, the Chairmanship sought to put a positive spin on the Meeting, with many efforts to create a relaxed and friendly atmosphere (the 'Spirit of Helsinki'). Efforts were also made to give space for the Russian Federation to present its visions for the new security architecture in Europe, which it had been taking up on many recent occasions. In the end, it was never clear what the 'new security architecture' vision would entail nor did most 'Western' participating States support any new regional security construction to take the place of the OSCE.


Even if the OSCE had not managed to reach a political ministerial declaration during the last six years' ministerial meetings, the Finnish Chairmanship was keeping up optimism, and undoubtedly did their utmost to find compromises. The issue of the continuation of the mandate of the Georgia Mission was deliberately kept out of the agenda. A joint declaration however did not emerge. One of the main problem points seemed to be the wish of the Russian Federation for a commitment to hold a summit the following year on the 'new security architecture'. Most other States adamantly opposed this. Another key issue was the differing views of the NATO countries and Russia with its partners on the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces.

Thirteen decisions were adopted at the Meeting, among them decisions on combating trafficking of human

beings, early education for Roma and Sinti, small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition, and countering terrorism. A statement was also agreed on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, highlighting momentum in the peace process there.

Finland, as the 2008 Chair, had a strong vision for the OSCE. This vision was based on continuing the work of the Organization based on its strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses and on fostering cooperation between the 56 participating States based on a perceived joint value base. As the Chairmanship, Finland did manage to keep the Organization's work ongoing while not letting the basis of the many OSCE commitments on security, human dimension and other fields to be eroded. However, it is clear that the geopolitical situation had dramatically changed from the 1990s, which was an era when a regional security Organization based on flexibility was needed for the many tasks of democracy building, promotion of human rights and enhancing comprehensive security. The challenges of the first decade of the new millennium are different. So are the pressures towards a political Organization of 56 States where decision-making is based on consensus. For these reasons, the Finnish Chairmanship tried to do what was possible in the present circumstances, namely to keep up the work of the Organization as one of the major regional comprehensive security organisations. One can assess it managed this successfully. Now the ball is with the next Chairmanship.





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