

Kazakhstan's Chairmanship: Challenges and Opportunities From the Moscow Perspective

Andrei Zagorski

Leading Researcher at the Center for War and Peace Studies of the Moscow State
Institute of International Relations (MGIMO–University).

DOI: [10.1163/187502309787858219](https://doi.org/10.1163/187502309787858219)

Those who have presumed that the pursuit of Kazakhstan's bid for the Chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has not only been backed by but, also, well coordinated with Russia should be bitterly disappointed. The evolution of that debate rather manifests divergence of the policies by Astana and Moscow towards the OSCE leaving little ground to believe that this trend is likely to be reversed by or during 2010.

The importance of the discord for either Russia or Kazakhstan can not be overestimated, however. What appeared initially to have been a vague proposal put forward in February 2003 by Rakhat Aliev, the former son-in-law of president Nursultan Nazarbayev, evolved into an ambition of the Kazakhstan leader. The Kremlin obviously accepted it and was prepared to do a favour for its key partner. This does not imply, however, that Moscow enthusiastically embraced the proposal. It rather acted on the basis of the understanding that working against it or even showing little support would be counterproductive taking into consideration Astana's complex policy of balancing between Russia, China, the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), its leadership ambition in Central Asia, and the very sensitive issue of energy and energy supply strategies in the Caspian region.

Although Moscow would expect little value to be added by the Kazakhstan Chairmanship to its policies, it would hardly expect much harm either. This makes the overall balance of supporting Nazarbayev's bid positive to Moscow which found it better to honour rather than to deny (or to allow others to deny) it. Otherwise, granting Kazakhstan the Chairmanship in the OSCE was not an important goal for Russia. Respectively, expectations would be low while Kazakhstan's Chairmanship itself may prove to become both a challenge and an opportunity for Russian policy.

The Diverging Policies

Since 2005, after the presidents of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) endorsed Kazakhstan's bid, Moscow has clearly spoken out in favour of Astana's candidacy. Supporting the bid appeared to help consolidate the group of OSCE critics that took shape from 2004¹ and included seven member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Kazakhstan among them. As the controversy over Kazakhstan's candidacy grew with the 2006 Brussels OSCE Ministerial Council failing to take a decision on the 2009 Chairmanship, Moscow joined Astana in insisting that leading the Organization constituted a right, not a privilege of any participating state. Moscow found it important to issue an interpretative statement in Brussels emphasizing that the decision on the Chairmanship 'shall not be subject to any conditions.'²

In November 2007, at the OSCE Council meeting in Madrid, Moscow pursued an even tougher policy than Astana itself by insisting that Kazakhstan should chair the Organization in 2009, not in 2010 or 2011. Otherwise, it threatened, it would not accept any other candidacy for 2009; thus blocking the consensus.³

However, the policies of Russia and Kazakhstan towards the OSCE found themselves on diverging paths during

1 See the Moscow July 3, 2004 statement in which the Foreign Ministers of the group formulated the reform agenda for the OSCE, as well as their September 15, 2004 appeal adopted in Astana: <http://www.ln.mid.ru/ns-dos.nsf/.../432569d800223f34c3256ecb004b5b5b?>; <http://cis.minsk.by/main.aspx?uid=20106>.

2 Interpretative Statement [Russia] under paragraph IV.1(A)6 of the OSCE Rules of Procedure. MC.DEC/20/06, 5 December 2006, Attachment 2.

3 Interfax: <http://txt.newsru.com/arch/world/30nov2007/kazakhstan.html>.

the past years. Astana's anger with the OSCE mounted from 1999 after president Nazarbayev had been sharply criticized by the Organization for extending his term in an early election.⁴ The president went as far as to make it clear that he did not consider membership in the OSCE indispensable.

The Kazakhstani criticism of the OSCE preceded the critic voiced from 2004 by the CSTO member states. In November 2000, the then Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan Yerlan Idrisov accused the Organization, at its Ministerial Council meeting in Vienna, of paying much more attention to the human dimension at the expense of the military, political, economic and ecological issues. The dispute reached its peak in 2003, well before the Russia-led CSTO policy on OSCE started consolidating and hardening. In October 2003, Kazakhstan's mission to the OSCE circulated a confidential memorandum accusing the Organization of excessively concentrating 'its attention on human dimension issues in selected regions' and of failing to enter the dialogue with the authorities of the relevant participating states while relying on biased and unverified independent information.

The memorandum sought to prepare the address by president Nazarbayev at the Permanent Council in November 2003. However, after the mission in Vienna had failed to gather support for its criticism, Nazarbayev's appearance was cancelled on short notice. Ever since, Kazakhstan has sought to align itself with the OSCE, although without compromising on domestic policies. The bid for the Chairmanship played an important role in softening Astana's approach towards the Organization while forcing it to seek a deal particularly with the participating states critical of its bid.

This development sharply contrasted the toughening rhetoric of the Russian Federation and even threatened the further consolidation of the CSTO claim for an overhaul of the OSCE modus operandi and particularly of that of the Warsaw based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In November 2007, exactly at the time when Moscow recirculated the proposal on the 'Basic principles' of the elections observation for the discussion at the Madrid Ministerial Council meeting, Astana was finalizing its deal, apparently, leaving the Russian counterparts unaware of it.

Right after the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke up in defense of 'our friends from Kazakhstan' against attempts to force them 'to somehow additionally prove their 'suitability,' unlike all the others who have so far been approved without any problems for the role of 'taking the helm' of the OSCE' Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Marat Tazhin announced important elements of the deal: his country was ready to 'duly take into account' the OSCE's recommendations in the course of democratic reforms and considered 'the human dimension to be one of the most important directions of the OSCE activity'. He then surprised Moscow by saying that, 'as a potential Chairman', Kazakhstan was 'committed to preserve ODIHR and its existing mandate' and was not going to 'support any future efforts to weaken them' or to be 'party to any proposals that are problematic for ODIHR and its mandate in the future.'⁵

4 On this see: A. Dubnov, 'OSCE Balltefield', in *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2008, no. 3. permanent URL: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/24/1212.html>.

5 A. Dubnov, Op. cit.

Russian diplomats called the 2007 Madrid incident a ‘foul’,⁶ undermining the credibility of Astana’s policy in the eyes of Moscow. The alienating effect could hardly be repaired by the speaker of the Kazakhstan’s Senate and former Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart Tokaev who, in a talk with the Russian daily newspaper ‘Kommersant’ on July 2, 2008, elaborated that the decision to give Astana the Chairmanship in the OSCE manifested that other participating states were ‘listening’ to the arguments of Astana and Moscow.⁷

Looking Forward to 2010: Damage Reduction

Provided any one in Moscow has nurtured any illusions regarding the possibility of a concerted action with Kazakhstan as a Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, those illusions must have evaporated by now. Moscow, rather, has to fear that the Chairmanship by Kazakhstan will stimulate further erosion of the CSTO collective opposition to the OSCE and particularly to the ODIHR modus operandi. With the possible exception of Uzbekistan, other Central Asian states may follow suit, even if not in the same explicit way as Astana has done.

While not revealing any concerns that Kazakhstan’s Chairmanship may directly challenge the Russian Federation — neither the thematic priorities selected by Astana for 2010, nor its basic attitude towards Russia would justify such concerns— the engagement of Kazakhstan with and within the OSCE limits the pursuit of Moscow’s tough policy towards the organization. Those who have stipulated that, confronted with the deal Astana had brokered with the US in order to obtain its Chairmanship goal, Moscow found itself forced to soften its policy at the Madrid Ministerial in 2007 and to refrain from threatening to quit the OSCE altogether,⁸ may have exaggerated the real intentions by Moscow. But there is some truth in this point.

Implying that the Russian leadership has little leverage to either persuade or punish Kazakhstan’s policies,⁹ Moscow has little choice but to avoid spoiling relations with Astana by denying it a successful Chairmanship. Without straitjacketing Moscow’s rhetoric, this puts a limit on how far the Russian diplomacy may go in challenging the OSCE in 2010. Will it want a quarrel with Astana on approving the Organization’s budget, or to deny Nazarbayev the privilege of endorsing an Astana OSCE declaration?

Moscow is probably less concerned with the declared readiness of Kazakhstan to pay a price for the privilege of chairing the OSCE by improving cooperation on the human dimension issues thus breaking the common front of the CSTO member states. There is no reason to believe that Kazakhstan, after having obtained its goal, would go far in adjusting its electoral code, media or political parties legislation alongside the recommendations by ODIHR and the OSCE Representative on the freedom of media.¹⁰

6 Soyuzniki otvernulis’ ot Vladimira Putina: kazakhi zashchitili OBSE ot russkikh, kotorye zashchishchali kazakhov (Allies have turned away from Vladimir Putin: the Kazakhs have defended the OSCE from Russians who had been defending the Kazakhs), www.rbcdaily.ru (quoted after: <http://www.newsland.ru/News/Detail/id/116774/at/42/> <http://www.newsland.ru/News/Detail/id/116774/cat/42/>)

7 J.-Ch. Peuch, Russia and Kazakhstan strive to put the OSCE democratization arm in a sling, in EurasiaNet.org, 10 July 2008, URL: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071408.shtml>.

8 D. Kosyrev, ‘Kazakhstan spas OBSE ot ischeznoveniya’ (Kazakhstan has saved the OSCE from disappearance), in Novosti Azerbaijan, December 1, 2007 (<http://www.newsazerbaijan.ru/analytics/20071201/42045057.html>).

9 Allies have turned away from Vladimir Putin: the Kazakhs have defended the OSCE from Russians who had been defending the Kazakhs.

10 On the failure of Kazakhstan to deliver on its promises by the end of 2007 see: Andrei Zagorski, ‘Kazakhstan’s Chairmanship Bid: A Balance Sheet of Pros and Cons’, in D. Warner (ed.), *The OSCE at a Turning Point: OSCE Chairmanship and Other Challenges*, PSIO Occasional Paper, 2007, no 4, Geneva, 2007, pp. 93–123.

Much greater concerns might be caused in Moscow by the manifested readiness of Astana to seek a successful Chairmanship by engaging not only (and not predominantly) with Russia but particularly with the US and the European nations. Kazakhstan's promises to raise the OSCE profile in Central Asia, or to engage more actively in and to seek a security belt around Afghanistan with OSCE participation contrasts with the objectives of the Russian policy seeking to prevent the erosion of the Russia-led regional cooperation frameworks, such as the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Community or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Kazakhstan's Chairmanship in the OSCE is going to be limited in time. This leads Moscow to believe that it will be able to control and limit the price it is supposed to pay for the favour it has done for President Nazarbayev. It also has a slight hope that Astana can add some value from the Russian perspective, particularly against the background of the active pursuit by Moscow of the recent proposal by President Dmitrii Medvedev who has initiated the convention of a Euro-Atlantic summit meeting to kick off negotiations on a new European Security Treaty.

Kazakhstan appears eager to grab the opportunity to harmonize its engagement with both Russia and the West, as well as its own ambition by offering Astana as a venue for an OSCE summit meeting in 2010. This option would please Moscow, particularly since the proposal of holding a summit meeting in 2009 under the Greek Chairmanship was not successful while Lithuania (the OSCE Chairman-in-Office in 2011) is hardly an option from the Moscow perspective due to strained bilateral relations.

There is still quite a way to go to achieve consensus on holding an OSCE summit meeting in Astana. For quite a number of participating states, such a summit would only be acceptable provided Kazakhstan lives up to its promise to harmonize domestic legislation with its OSCE commitments. Thus the eventual gains of Moscow from Kazakhstan's Chairmanship remain very vague.



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.

Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Het Nutshuis
Riviermarkt 4
2513 AM The Hague
The Netherlands

© Netherlands Helsinki Committee. All rights reserved.

www.nhc.nl