

Missing the big picture? Retrospective on OSCE strategic thinking on Central Asia

Vladimir D. Shkolnikov

Director of Freedom House Europe. The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not represent the views or policies of Freedom House and any of its donors.

DOI: [10.1163/187502309789894866](https://doi.org/10.1163/187502309789894866)

In this article I will make two intertwining arguments about OSCE's work in Central Asia. The first is that the organization failed to engage the leaders of the region in a political dialogue, opting instead for a quasi-developmental approach centered on technical assistance projects, many of questionable provenance and of limited if not negative impact. The second is that the OSCE has failed to promote in the region its own comprehensive vision of security with the human dimension at its core, instead accepting the security notions of the region's leaders. The latter are based on preservation of personal power and wealth and strengthening the tools to achieve that aim rather than on the respect for OSCE commitments. The most logical way out of the situation is for the OSCE to fade into the shadows of other actors, especially the European Union. Other international actors should however, be cognizant of the lessons of the OSCE's involvement in the region.

Initial steps

In the early 1990s, the OSCE's engagement in Central Asia was limited. The organization was heavily engaged in the Balkans, while most other issues were treated as very tangential. The participating States agreed to deploy an OSCE Mission to Tajikistan to assist with peace and recovery efforts in the civil war-ravaged State and established a Tashkent-based Central Asia Liaison Office (CALO) staffed first by one, and then by two internationals. The main function of CALO was to be the organization's 'eyes and ears' in the region.

Some of the organization's officials, especially its first Secretary General, Wilhelm Hoynck, paid special attention to Central Asia. The contacts of the organization with the region and its thinking about the region were limited. The OSCE essentially missed the first years of independence of Central Asian states and had little understanding of the extent to which authoritarianism was taking hold in the region.

Only towards the end of the 1990s, especially after the Dayton-Paris peace agreements on Bosnia-Herzegovina were concluded and prospects for stabilization in the Balkans became visible, did the OSCE show signs of interest in greater engagement. However, it lacked a strategy and vision on how to approach the region. The 1998 Ministerial Council in Oslo tasked the 1999 Norwegian Chairmanship to produce a report on how the OSCE could strengthen the coordinated approach of the international organizations to Central Asia. The Norwegian Chairmanship, in turn, appointed Wilhelm Hoynck, by that time former OSCE Secretary General, to produce this report which was to outline elements of such a strategy and to serve as a catalyst for shifting the organization's internal focus to the region.¹

First steps and missteps

OSCE had, at the time a relatively clean slate in the region. Its involvement was welcomed by the region's leaders since a membership in a primarily European organization brought them dividends before a domestic audience and gave them opportunities to interact with countries whose investment they craved. Only Saparmurat Niyazov, Turkmenistan's self-styled egomaniacal Turkmenbashi, had already embarked on a path of isolating the country from external influences.

OSCE had a choice of putting human dimension issues of each of the countries on the forefront of its work

¹ See Decision on Central Asia (MC(7).DEC/7) in Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Oslo, 1998 Seventh Meeting of the Ministerial Council 2-3 December 1998 available on http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1998/12/4168_en.pdf.

in the region. It could have also tried to leverage the Central Asians' desire to be the organization's members to push for serious reforms. However, the OSCE officials most interested in the region — Wilhelm Hoynck and Director of the Conflict Prevention Center (later Secretary General) Jan Kubiš — were proponents of an approach that would emphasize strengthening regional ties between these countries. They were concerned about conflict potential in the region as the example of the Tajik civil war was adroitly played up by the region's leaders, and appeared to have bought into the idea that if Central Asian states developed enough common interests, a conflict in the region would become less likely. While there may have been some merit to this thinking, it was contrary to the thinking of the leaders of the countries, and was excessively grounded in certain strains of Western European realpolitik, without looking at more ambitious aim of pushing the Central Asians to move towards more pluralistic political systems.

In the late 1990s, Hoynck and Kubiš became the main engines of the so- called 'regional approach', trying to get all countries of Central Asia at the table to discuss topics that these OSCE officials thought should be of interest to the Central Asians. The 1999 report presented by Hoynck to the OSCE participating States largely advocated this approach, focusing on external threats to the region. The Hoynck report greatly downplayed the risks associated with continuing violations of human rights in the region with the authoritarian nature of the region's political regimes. It was harshly criticized by human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch,² that followed the deteriorating situation in the region with concern.

Nevertheless, despite the excessively optimistic assumptions, the key theme of the Hoynck report was a need for political dialogue with the human dimension as a key element of it. This thesis of the Hoynck report provides a useful benchmark for looking at how well the OSCE has done in the last ten years at the political dialogue and at placing the human dimension at a heart of it.

In cooperation with other international organizations the OSCE conducted a number of regional conferences on countering drug trafficking and terrorism, including in Tashkent in October 2000,³ and in Bishkek in 2001⁴. The last big regional conference brought together the region's education ministers under the Bulgarian chairmanship in 2004.⁵ The British-led 'water initiative', pushed by the Norwegian chairmanship, which sought to get the Central Asian countries to cooperate on improving management of water resources and reducing what the Westerners perceived as risks for a potential conflict between upstream and downstream countries over water, was a product of the same thinking. All these initiatives shared something in common: Central Asian leaders ignored them and did very little to follow up on the recommendations of these regional meetings. And, none of these conferences was particularly concerned with making human dimension its key

2 The Human Rights Watch Representative writing for these pages correctly noted that Hoynck's report 'whitewashed states' records on human rights engagement with the OSCE, calling the progress 'remarkable' and neglecting to note the states' backsliding on human rights since 1996, when the OSCE established its first field presence in the region.' Elizabeth Andersen *The OSCE and Human Rights Watch: From Norm-Setting to Implementation and Enforcement in the OSCE Yearbook 2000*, Center for the OSCE Research, p. 394 on http://www.core-hamburg.de/CORE_English/pub_osce_inh_00.htm.

3 See Summary Report, International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: An Integrated Approach to Counter Drugs, Organised Crime and Terrorism 19-20 October 2000 Tashkent, Uzbekistan Organised by: United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention & Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, available on http://www.unodc.org/uzbekistan/en/conference_tashkent_2000-10-19_1.html.

4 UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Summary Report Bishkek International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: Strengthening Comprehensive Efforts to Counter Terrorism, 13-14 December 2001 Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic.

5 See http://www.osce.org/cio/item_1_8193.html.

element.

There are at least two reasons that Central Asians did not assume any ownership of the 'regional approach'. The first is their view that their independence would not benefit from cooperation, especially driven from outside of the region. To them, such a setup was reminiscent of the Soviet times, when their future depended on the whims of the Kremlin. The Central Asian leaders did not want interdependence as they were simply too suspicious of each other, and ultimately they wanted the West to strengthen their individual rule over their countries. And this meant that the Central Asian leaders had a completely different view of security from that enshrined in the OSCE documents. And this is the second, and the key, reason for the failure of the 'regional approach'. As Daniel Kimmage astutely put it, 'In established democracies with strong institutions, security challenges on the national level are broadly understood as serious, wide-ranging threats to the well-being of the citizenry that are best countered by concerted government action. This definition presumes the existence of robust, transparent institutions; elections in accord with international standards; and an elected political leadership that is accountable to voters. As a result, it does not envision a contradiction between the actions of government and the interests of citizens.... Some of the Central Asian nations lack all but the barest trappings of democratic governance. All of Central Asia's states are, to one degree or another, nations in which an elite partly or wholly consumed by the pursuit of its own material interests maintains power through the exercise of decorative democracy. With elections stage-managed and institutions weak, the elite, which breaks down into a welter of informal influence groups vying for control of material resources, is largely unaccountable. Throughout the region, national elites have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to a single overriding interest — the preservation of power to maintain a materially beneficial status quo. This does not preclude the existence of other interests, including the common good of ordinary citizens, but it by no means presumes them. Elite commitment to the maintenance of the status quo is usually expressed in terms of a need to preserve 'stability'...'⁶

The OSCE officials and the participating States who were conceiving the first steps of engaging with Central Asia failed to fully appreciate the extent of the differences in the security thinking of the Central Asian and Western leaders. This gap is central to the OSCE's approach to the region. The failure to appreciate this difference and to address it predetermined the subsequent failure of the OSCE to bring Central Asia closer to its own standards. Rather, the OSCE found itself compromising its own standards and image in the course of its work in the region, and more often than not, adopting the security prism of Central Asian leaders. The Polish Foreign Minister Geremek, during his 1998 OSCE Chairmanship of the OSCE, was one of very few exceptions to this, taking the Central Asian leaders to task for their treatment of the opposition and human rights activists, drawing on his own experience as an opposition leader during the Communist period.

The ODIHR's approach to Central Asia and the rise of projects

In 1997, at the time when the OSCE was only beginning to contemplate ways of greater engagement with the Central Asian states, Swiss diplomat Gerard Stoudmann became the head of the ODIHR. His mission was to build up the ODIHR from merely an election observation office and an organizer to human dimension meetings to an entity that would assist the participating States in meeting their commitments. Stoudmann focused on Uzbekistan as one of his priorities, citing concerns of the delegations in Vienna with the situation in that country. He ordered his staff — most of whom had never been to Central Asia, let alone Uzbekistan — to

⁶ Daniel Kimmage, *Security Challenges in Central Asia: Implications for the EU's Engagement Strategy CEPS Policy Briefs* (CEPS Policy Briefs), issue: 112/2007, pages: 16, on www.ceeol.com.

draft project proposals which would form the basis of concluding the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Uzbekistan. The MoU envisaged that the ODIHR, assisted by CALO, would provide assistance to Uzbekistan in implementing its commitments. From the project development point of view, this approach was highly dubious. However, Stoudmann's exercise was purely political: he wanted to open a door to holding discussions on human dimension issues with the state whose human rights record was dismal, and at the same time elevate his office, and his own position to the main interlocutor of Central Asian leaders on human dimension issues. In the following year, the exercise of concluding MoUs was repeated in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Predictably, Turkmenistan refused to follow suit.

Stoudmann's gambit of forcing the ODIHR's way into Central Asia could have worked if the projects and political work went hand in hand. I.e., the implementation of the projects needed to lead to high-level, in-depth discussion on human dimension issues in the region and, if the projects at least tried to touch upon the more sensitive subjects, especially the superpresidential power of the region's leaders, such a two-pronged approach could have produced some results. Instead, the ODIHR staff, some of whom had not had much experience in project management or in Central Asia, had to fly to the region for numerous workshops and training sessions with various local officials, most of whom were not very interested in human rights. The ODIHR Director's visits to the region were rare and the high-level discussions on human dimension never materialized. As a result, the projects acquired a life and logic of their own, amounting to the ODIHR showing the 'OSCE flag' in the region. The only real benefit of the ODIHR's projects was the engagement with the region's civil society and greater exposure of Central Asian NGOs to the OSCE standards.

However, the lack of clear thinking about the political consequences of the ODIHR's project-based approach to Central Asia which emerged in parallel but completely independently of the Vienna-based ideas on the 'regional approach' to Central Asia revealed the most serious problems in the organization: absence of a clear vision, absence of relevant regional expertise, and absence of coherence throughout the organization.

OSCE establishes offices in Central Asian capitals

In late 1998, with the ODIHR projects underway, the OSCE made a decision to open offices in Almaty, Bishkek and Ashgabat. Some tension was caused by the fact that CALO was downgraded to the OSCE Centre in Tashkent, and Uzbekistan, hitherto home to the liaison office in the region, appeared to lose some of the optics of appearing the regional leader. This resistance by Uzbekistan, however, was overcome.

Originally the OSCE offices in the region were staffed by only four internationals: the Ambassador and an officer in each of the OSCE's dimensions. The budget of the offices was small and human dimension officers were involved in the ODIHR's projects. At the same time, the offices monitored the developments in their countries and wrote reports that were distributed to all delegations in Vienna. Soon it was realized that human dimension problems in the region were grave and having one human dimension officer was insufficient.⁷ However, the first wave of OSCE ambassadors to the region, Paul Ullmann of Austria (head of the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat), Ulrich Schoening of Germany (head of the OSCE Centre in Almaty), and Jerzy Wieclaw of Poland (head of the OSCE Centre in Bishkek) had strong personal commitment to the human dimension. Their blunt reporting, their interest in engaging with the civil society, and their overall political acumen remain unmatched in the history of the OSCE in the region. Most of the OSCE's links to the civil society, perhaps the

⁷ In the following year, when the OSCE established offices in Baku and Yerevan, it learned from mistakes by assigning two internationals assigned to human dimension.

most valuable aspect of the organization's work in the region, were developed during their tenures. However, their willingness to stick to the OSCE values and to call a spade a spade was not received well by the region's leaders. Diplomatic channels were activated to demand that the OSCE not only criticize, but assist the Central Asian states. These demands served to deflect attention from numerous violations of human dimension commitments in the region but, regrettably, did not fall on deaf ears among OSCE delegation of Western participating States. Some Western delegations to the OSCE were also interested in the OSCE becoming a technical assistance organization.

The failure of the political track and the triumph of 'projectivism'

When attending one of the OSCE meetings on Central Asia late last century, this author heard a Western ambassador to the OSCE, considered one of the best by his peers, describe the OSCE as a political organization which is on the way to remaking itself to be a 'service organization.' In the view of this ambassador, this was a good thing. During his visit to Washington around the same time, the author was told by a State Department official dealing with the OSCE that the OUS wants to reshape the OSCE from an organization 'that talks about things into an organization that is doing things on the ground.' The official was unable to respond to a question on what things OSCE ought to be doing.

These examples were precursors to what was to come in the 21st century. The organization essentially failed to sustain the political dialog with the region's leaders while submerging further into a morass of doing projects with unclear objectives that no other organizations took up.

At the turn of the century, the participating States did recognize the need for political dialogue with the Central Asian states and the successive Chairmanships, despite some objections of protocol from Tashkent, maintained an appointment of a senior official as Chairmanship Special Representative for Central Asia. Secretary General OSCE Jan Kubiš held the position in 2000. Wilhelm Hoyneck was appointed to the position in 2001 and German diplomat Herbert Salber was the Senior Adviser for Central Asia to the Portuguese OSCE chairmanship in 2002.

As recognition that access to leaders of Central Asian states was imperative in order for the OSCE to be able to push for the reforms, the 2003 OSCE Dutch chairmanship significantly upgraded that position by appointing former Finnish President, a noted negotiator, Martti Ahtisaari to serve as its Special Envoy to Central Asia. Ahtisaari's appointment was quite unusual for the OSCE as former heads of States with a substantial international resume do not usually enter its' orbit (the only other examples were ex-Spanish PM Felipe Gonzales's short term assignment to Former Yugoslavia in the midst of mass protests in December 1996 over controversial local elections in the previous month and the ex-Austrian chancellor Franz Vranitzky's troubleshooting work in Albania in 1997, a politically turbulent year in that country). Ahtisaari was a figure difficult for the Central Asian leaders to ignore. And, he was the embodiment of the fact that there is life after Presidency, something difficult for Central Asian leaders, who do not envisage ever leaving the head position, to comprehend. Ahtisaari's experience in many other troubled parts of the world made him a unique figure in the OSCE. Ahtisaari was extended in his position by the Bulgarian Chairmanship in 2004.

In addition to appointing Ahtisaari, the Dutch Chairmanship viewed as a success the fact that in the 2003 budget, the OSCE managed to shift some of its resources from Southeastern Europe field operations to Central Asia. However, the manner the funds were to be used led to a downward spiral for the OSCE's standing in the

region. Ignoring the fact that the ODIHR projects initiated in 1998- 1999 were not producing tangible results, and, in fact, the ODIHR all but stopped all activities in Uzbekistan, the country where it first started its project machinery, the OSCE participating States tasked the OSCE Centres in Central Asia for the first time to get heavily engaged in implementation of technical assistance projects. Not much consideration was given to how well the OSCE was equipped to implement the projects, to assess the quality and the impact of the projects, or to cope with project staff which was far more interested in the perpetuation of their own projects than in the advancement of the OSCE values. Most importantly, not much thought was given to the time and resources the OSCE Centres and especially their heads would have to spend on overseeing projects as opposed to following the situation on the ground, maintaining contacts with NGOs and speaking out on violations of human rights commitments. And, as long as a political heavyweight such as Ahtisaari could deliver the political message, apparently the role of the Heads of OSCE Centres was judged that the latter was less critical.

As a result of the orientation towards projects, the OSCE has become an implementing agency for projects of various questionable provenance which are yet to show results. None are more questionable as projects to train and equip police in the increasingly authoritarian countries without attempting to change the overall legislative framework in which police operate and without trying to ensure that the police are not used for political aims. Increasingly, generations of projects became an end in themselves for the OSCE field offices, and the slogan of 'assisting governments' became an excuse for taking on any activity. In this author's view, the appropriate term for this approach is 'projectivism.' Projectivism is a belief that any project, as long as a donor can be found to finance it, is suitable for the OSCE to implement, regardless of its developmental, security, or human dimension impact. In addition, it is believed that a project is preferable to any other kind of intervention. Over time, projectivism has become the guiding OSCE principle in Central Asia. One of the heads of the OSCE Centres in the region routinely concluded any conversation with NGO activists or with visiting staff from the OSCE institutions with a phrase 'let's make a project.' And, to illustrate how far the OSCE was willing to go in its project endeavours, the OSCE Office in Tashkent involved itself in the training of dogs for the Uzbek police. In 2005, (the year of the Andijan massacre described below) the OSCE Annual Report claims that the law enforcement bodies 'use specially trained dogs to detect criminals or terrorists'.⁸

It is simply worth recording that the OSCE finds it acceptable to train dogs for law enforcement agencies in a country with one of the worst human rights records on the planet. If the OSCE Annual Report is to be believed literally, the police dogs can distinguish terrorists without presumption of innocence or due process. Even if one takes that phrase as merely a case of poor report drafting by a public affairs official, what is completely clear is that the OSCE is not able to reflect on the substance and potential impact of projects. Apparently, it is not at all bothered about the likelihood of strengthening the repressive apparatus of the Karimov regime as a result of such a project for the sake of advancing the cause of projectivism rather than its own commitments. This is done despite the fact that the OSCE documents contain no commitments that can justify such projects.

With projects gaining momentum, the political pillar of the OSCE suddenly became significantly weaker as of the beginning of 2005. The Western European countries that footed the bill for Ahtisaari's services as a CIO Personal Envoy for Central Asia, citing 'lack of results,' decided that they could no longer afford to keep him at that position. If this was a true reason, it demonstrated extremely limited understanding of the region. To achieve 'results' in Central Asia would take more than two years, and the OSCE was never going to get anyone of Ahtisaari's stature to work on its behalf on the political side. Ahtisaari's sudden dismissal was

8 http://www.osce.org/publications/sg/2006/04/18784_589_en.pdf, p. 104.

probably a turning point in many Western States' hope for a serious role of the OSCE in the region. The 2005 Slovenian Chairmanship appointed Slovenia's ex-Premier and ex-Foreign Minister Alojs Peterle as its Special Representative to Central Asia. Despite all of his impressive credentials, Mr. Peterle was not Martti Ahtisaari. Meanwhile, 2005 was the year when the OSCE was tested the most in Central Asia.

Human Dimension emergencies: use of the Moscow Mechanism in Turkmenistan and the response to the Andijan massacre

While projectivism was gaining momentum, the authoritarianism in Central Asia was becoming increasingly ruthless in its methods. In response to the alleged coup in Turkmenistan against president Saparmurad 'Turkmenbashi' Niyazov in late November of 2002 and the arrests of individuals accused of plotting this coup, including former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov and former Ambassador to the OSCE Batyr Berdyev, and the failure of Turkmenistan to provide information about the events, including in camera trials of the accused, ten OSCE states invoked the so-called Moscow Mechanism and appointed a French lawyer Emmanuel Decaux to write a report on the events. Turkmenistan responded by refusing to appoint a co-rapporteur and by failing to issue an entry visa to Decaux. With the assistance of the ODIHR, the report was written by Decaux in early 2003 in Paris, Warsaw and Vienna on the basis of interviews and media reports and contained credible evidence of egregious human rights violations in Turkmenistan. The Dutch Chairmanship had no clear roadmap on what to do with the Decaux report. It is worth noting and praising the then Dutch Foreign Minister and CIO Jaap de Hoop Scheffer for traveling to Turkmenistan twice in 2003 and for conducting a press conference in Ashgabat, something other visiting CIOs failed to do. However, not much was done in strategic terms, such as adjusting the project-centered approach or having more focused events on the human dimension challenges in the region.

The OSCE's (meaning both the organization's executive leadership, the Chairmanships and the participating States) lack of thinking on how to respond to egregious human rights violations became, once again, evident after the 2005 massacre of hundreds of civilians in Andijan, a city on the Uzbekistan side of the Ferghana Valley. The OSCE struggled to respond to the massacre, choosing very careful diplomatic language. The head of the OSCE Centre in Tashkent, Miroslav Jenca in the first post-Andijan press release encouraged, 'all sides to work toward a peaceful resolution of the present outbreak of conflict' and offered 'the assistance of the OSCE to examine the deeper causes of the unrest, with the aim of moving towards a sustainable solution'.

⁹It was not until after the ODIHR responded to the Andijan events by sending staff to Tashkent to monitor trials of the alleged perpetrators and to Kyrgyzstan to interview refugees who fled the massacre. On the basis of this the ODIHR produced a report, which, however, was never formally presented to the Permanent Council by then ODIHR Director Strohal nor formally discussed in the PC. The OSCE Chairman in-Office, Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, continued calling for an international investigation. Yet he and other OSCE officials steered clear of making statements that would side with the view of human rights organizations that the Andijan events were not a 'conflict' but a massacre of hundreds of innocent civilians. In a nod to the official Uzbek position, the Slovenian chairmanship did not fully disconnect itself from the notion that the Uzbekistan

9 http://www.osce.org/uzbekistan/item_1_14259.html.

government's reaction in the Andijan events could in some way be connected to the fight against terrorism.¹⁰ The priority of the OSCE officials traveling to Uzbekistan after the Andijan massacre seemed to be maintaining ties with the government. However, the OSCE refrained from finding a way (for example, by convening a conference of some sort) to air a view that the very nature of the Tashkent regime, rather than outside factors, has become the greatest security risk in the country, and that staying the course in Uzbekistan would only lead to more Andijans.

The Uzbek government sensed the OSCE's weakness and managed to reduce the OSCE Office in Tashkent's mandate to that of 'Project co-ordinator' where all the projects were to be agreed with the host country. The participating States, including those from North America and Western Europe, simply did not have it in them to even initiate a discussion of sanctions against Uzbekistan. By now, the OSCE simply has no leverage over the Central Asian states, and the OSCE seems destined to continue being engaged in training of law enforcement canines in Uzbekistan.

Coming undone: the response to the Kyrgyzstan's 'Tulip Revolution'

In retrospect, the key moment where the OSCE could have pushed its values and tried to achieve results in the democracy sphere appears to have been the post- 'Tulip Revolution' Kyrgyzstan. But here, the OSCE seemed to lack understanding of the country and resolve for more robust promotion of its own values.

Alojs Peterle, Slovenia's ex-Premier and Foreign Minister, became the main point man for Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the Revolution. As one of very few international players on the ground, and due to the new leadership's need for international legitimacy, the OSCE had a great deal of leverage. However, it seemed to only be concerned with the personified leadership configuration, especially with the *idée fixe* that Kurmanbek Bakiev should be the president, while Feliks Kulov should be the prime Minister after having spent several years in prison.¹¹ This, in the eyes of the OSCE officials, was to keep the supposedly tenuous North-South balance in the country. The OSCE appeared to not want an open electoral competition between Bakiev and Kulov in the first post- revolutionary presidential poll. The Slovenian chairmanship continued pushing 'unity' even though OSCE has no commitments on 'unity'.¹² The OSCE did not seem open to even entertaining using its political weight to promote among the Kyrgyz elite more imaginative ideas such as weakening of the executive power in favor of a much stronger legislature and thus breaking the hold of superpresidentialism over the region. At the very least, among all the projects, a series of seminars on success of parliamentary democracy could have been tried. Rather, the OSCE supported discussions of various superpresidential

10 'Nevertheless, we all are committed to the fight against terrorism, but we are also committed to protecting human rights. Using excessive and indiscriminate force against civilians can not be excused.' Head of the Chairmanship Task Force Ambassador Boris Frlec, The Slovenian Chairmanship: A Mid-Term Report in The Reform of the OSCE: 15 Years After the Charter of Paris for a New Europe: Problems, Challenges and Risks Edited by Victor-Yves Ghebali and Daniel Warner, Graduate Institute of International Studies (GIIS), Geneva, 2006.

11 Knowledgeable insiders were concerned about the impact of jail time on Kulov's mental state and his understanding of the political dynamics, and thus OSCE's overt backing of personalities.

12 In the Chairman's view, the OSCE should now be free to concentrate its efforts on several priority areas in Kyrgyzstan: promoting unity between the various sides, political parties and the northern and southern halves of the country; offering further support to the development of democratic institutions including an independent, pluralistic media; and continuing its activities in the field of good governance, as well as capacity-building in several key areas. In OSCE Press release dated 31 March 2005 'Chairman-in-Office urges unity and offers OSCE support to Kyrgyzstan' http://www.osce.org/cio/item_1_13653.html.

variants of the Constitution by the public, reminiscent of similar exercises during the Soviet times. Mostly, the OSCE bypassed the opportunity to even contemplate how to avoid the well-established pattern or emergence of yet another authoritarian president in the region. It was simply not able to grasp the big picture. Many NGO activists noted that the OSCE officials seemed lost in a complex situation. At this point, one can only speculate about different scenarios if a more experienced international envoy, such as Aahtisaari, was involved.

It is beyond the scope of this article to describe the details of Kurmanbek Bakiyev's consolidation of authoritarian rule using the constitutional tools at his disposal. It is fair to say that the OSCE never assessed how its projects relate to this process. During his April 2007 visit to Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Spanish Foreign Minister Moratinos praised the project to train and equip the police in the country.¹³ And, when a week after his ritualistic annual one-day Chairmanship visit to Kyrgyzstan, the OSCE-trained police were used to disperse an opposition rally in the central square of Bishkek, Moratinos spoke in generalities about the need for dialog and failed to underline the importance of freedom of peaceful assembly. And at no point was the appropriateness of the police project questioned.

And, when the Kyrgyz Parliament controlled by Bakiyev, adopted a highly restrictive law on assemblies in 2008, despite the protests of the ODIHR and the Council of Europe, the OSCE's police project remained unaffected.¹⁴ It has acquired a momentum of its own, and the OSCE commitments, the goal of political dialog as well as the rise of authoritarianism, have seemingly become irrelevant. The police project in Kyrgyzstan continued as if nothing happened in the country.

Concluding observations

This article is being written shortly after Freedom House, in its Nations in Transit 2009 study found, for the first time ever, that all five Central Asian states now belong to the 'consolidated authoritarian regime' category, with Kyrgyzstan making its debut in this category. The superpresidential system is now well-entrenched in these countries, making them, in the absence of clear rules on presidential succession, highly unstable and dependent on the whims of a small group of individuals. And it is clear that the Central Asian leaders' view of security is different from what is enshrined in the OSCE commitments.

It is not easy to find evidence to give the OSCE credit for trying to stop the authoritarian trends in the region. Notwithstanding the fact that the ODIHR election observation mission reports are usually justifiably tough in assessing electoral processes in these countries and that the OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media routinely makes indignant statements on the treatment of journalists in the region, the OSCE has seemingly dropped attempts for political dialog in the countries. Under the Belgian, the Spanish, the Finnish and the Greek chairmanships, very little attention has been paid to the region. Certainly, the annual ritualistic Chairman-in-Office trips, where each capital is visited for a day, cannot be seen as a serious political engagement. The OSCE's main human dimension body, the ODIHR, despite the dramatic expansion of its staff, has not been very visible in the region recently. Most remarkably, the previous two ODIHR Directors have managed to complete their five year terms without taking the full tours of the region. Gerard Stoudmann

13 <http://www.osce.org/item/24019.html>.

14 *OSCE rights body, Council of Europe express disappointment at signing of amendments to Kyrgyzstan's assembly law*, http://www.osce.org/odihr/item_1_32721.html.

failed to visit Turkmenistan and Tajikistan during his tenure,¹⁵ while his successor Christian Strohal has not even attempted to visit Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and has not gone to Kyrgyzstan since the post-Tulip revolution's 2005 Presidential elections, despite holding the directorship of the ODIHR until mid-2008 (yet he managed to travel extensively to destinations such as Vienna, Washington, and Geneva).¹⁶ This means that Tajikistan has not been a destination of a visit by an ODIHR head for the last 11 years, suggesting something other than the organization's attention to Central Asia.

A clear indicator of the decline in the importance of the OSCE as a key regional organization on Central Asia is the development of an EU Central Asia strategy. A large number (a majority, if one takes the candidate countries into account) of the OSCE participating States felt that they need to develop their relationships with the region in a different framework than the OSCE.

The Central Asian leaders, on the other hand, have little reason to be unhappy with the OSCE. They have come a long way from the times that the OSCE was an indispensable reputation booster for them as a link to Europe. Kazakhstan, despite its deteriorating human rights record, is about to hold the OSCE chairmanship. And law enforcement agencies of the OSCE states continue to be the beneficiaries of OSCE's current strategy of projectivism. OSCE is still involved in the canine training for law enforcement agencies of Uzbekistan. And, the involvement with the police of Kyrgyzstan is going strong. When President Bakiyev pressed the Parliament at the end of 2008 to sign into law the potential use of the military in domestic affairs, surely as an insurance against the resumption of the opposition protests, the OSCE chose to remain silent. And this summarizes a strange evolution of the organization from the high interest in Central Asia that started around 1998 to the current situation of the OSCE as, at most, a marginal actor.

Certainly, this article's argument and harsh assessments will be challenged by those who will cite Central Asia's strategic importance as a reason for the evolution in OSCE policies to the region. The author whole-heartedly agrees with the view that Central Asian states are strategically important. And, because they are so important, the author believes that it would have been more preferable for the OSCE to have worked with the Central Asian states at the political level within the OSCE's comprehensive security framework, and not by cutting corners on one of its dimensions. At this time, such a prospect appears nearly utopian.

15 To be fair, Stoudmann planned to visit Turkmenistan, but the Turkmen government failed to produce a program of the visit.

16 To his credit, current ODIHR Director, Janez Lenarcic has already visited Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and has planned to travel to Uzbekistan, only to see that plan fall through due to an airline-induced problem.



This article was first published with Brill | Nijhoff publishers, and was featured on the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM) website.

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
Rivierismarkt 4
2513 AM The Hague
The Netherlands

© Netherlands Helsinki Committee. All rights reserved.

www.nhc.nl