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Pál Dunay

Kazakhstan's Unique OSCE Chairmanship in 2010

Every calendar year, another participating State takes the helm of the OSCE. In 2010, it was Kazakhstan's turn. Astana's Chairmanship attracted more attention than any other – both prior to and during the Chairmanship itself. A year later, analysts continue to try to draw up the definitive balance sheet of the Central Asian republic's time in charge of the Organization.

More often than not, these analysts make reference to the "uniqueness" of Kazakhstan's Chairmanship. It is questionable, however whether the term "unique" is meaningful in this context. In some sense, every Chairmanship is unique, just as every participating State is different. Yet the frequent use of this term may illustrate that Kazakhstan's Chairmanship was "more unique" than that of any other participating State. Kazakhstan is unique in the following ways: It was the first Chairmanship country to be a member state of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (as well as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, CSTO, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, SCO), the first predominantly Muslim country, the first Asian state, the first with a semi-authoritarian regime, and the first with an OSCE field mission (the OSCE Centre in Astana) on its soil. It is not only the objective features of Kazakhstan that made its Chairmanship unique. The process by which Kazakhstan was granted the Chairmanship was also *sui generis*. It had to wait longer than any other country between its application and receipt of the Chairmanship. Kazakhstan first indicated its interest in chairing the OSCE in early 2003. This presented a problem to many participating States,[1] as doubts existed as to whether the country lived up to all the Organization's principles and norms. This was also acknowledged indirectly by Kazakh analysts.[2] In sum, Kazakhstan was a "special" candidate both in terms of substance, i.e. its profile, and with regard to the process by which it came to the helm.

In the assessment of Kazakhstan's application, the expectations of various groups of participating States made a fundamental difference. The countries that started out from an abstract benchmark that would allow only those

1 For a discussion of this and the divisions within the EU, see Margit Hellwig-Bötte, Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship – The Road to Europe? In: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2008*, Baden-Baden 2009, pp. 175-186, here: pp. 177-178.

2 In an otherwise apologetic article, a Kazakh author contrasted the OSCE/ODIHR assessments of the 2004 and the 2007 parliamentary elections and concluded that the latter were significantly more in accord with the OSCE rules and "without significant violations of the election law". This indirectly recognizes two facts: Neither election was in full accord with OSCE requirements, and there has been an improvement from 2004 to 2007. See Talgat Mamiraimov, Factors that Helped Kazakhstan Be Elected Chair of the OSCE in 2010, in: *Central Asia's Affairs,* 2008, pp. 3-5, here: p. 3.

states with a spotless record in everything the OSCE has addressed (and there are not many political matters – domestic or international – that the OSCE has not addressed) to be granted the Chairmanship gave Kazakhstan no chance. Understandably, the US, under an ideologically determined Republican administration, expected the Chairmanship to be held "by a nation that has demonstrated leadership in implementing all the [OSCE] commitments" including "guaranteeing citizens the basic right to free and fair elections, independent political activity, and unfettered media expression".[3] Other states were more willing to see the matter as part of an evolutionary process and assessed Kazakhstan on the basis of the progress it had made so far. Some Western European states, notably Germany, belonged in this category. Last but not least, for countries such as Russia, the decision was part of a classic Cold-War-type game. Either "we" prevail and Kazakhstan gets the Chairmanship or it does not and then it is "our" loss. This was a consequence of the face-off between a confrontational, hegemonic US and an assertive Russian foreign policy. The latter also wanted to gain credit in the post-Soviet space by backing up former Soviet republics that were willing to support Russian policy in turn. In fact, the controversy surrounding Kazakhstan's nomination to the OSCE Chairmanship was a minor skirmish on a relatively unimportant battlefield,[4] given the OSCE's longstanding lack of centrality to pan-European politics. As will be illustrated later, the division that was apparent over the granting of Chairmanship also prevailed in the assessment of Kazakhstan's performance in the Chair. That is why those who paid close attention to the Chairmanship often drew diametrically opposite conclusions from their observations.

There are some who hold the Kazakh Chairmanship to an absurdly high standard. They seem to believe that the Chairmanship should have fixed all the problems that the OSCE has accumulated over a 15-year period (since its relative decline started in the mid-1990s), while at the same time, to fulfil all the promises it made to achieve the OSCE Chairmanship, Kazakhstan would have needed to become a fully fledged democracy. These people would only have been satisfied, in other words, if Kazakhstan had achieved not only a decisive contribution to the development of the OSCE but also a major internal transformation. Others had far more realistic expectations and have thus drawn a more positive conclusion regarding Kazakhstan's achievements in the Chair.

3 US Mission to the OSCE, response to Ambassador Rupnik, Head of the Centre in Almaty, as delivered by Deputy Representative Douglas Davidson to the Permanent Council, Vienna, 29 January 2004. Quoted by Andrei Zagorski, Kazakhstan's Chairmanship Bid: A Balance Sheet of Pros and Cons, in: Daniel Warner (ed.), *The OSCE at a Turning Point: OSCE Chairmanship and Other Challenges*, Geneva 2007, pp. 93-124, here: p. 95.

4 Cf. Arkady Dubnov, OSCE Battlefield, in: *Russia in Global Affairs* 3/2008, at: http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_11275.

In: IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2011, Baden-Baden 2012, pp. 49-63.

Kazakhstan was nominated to the Chairmanship at the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Madrid in late 2007.[5] It had two years to prepare for the challenging task. Indeed, for a country with limited experience in multilateral diplomacy, the challenge was a major one. In the end, Kazakhstan is a relatively new sovereign state and, compared to many European countries, has not been exposed to the workings of many international institutions. Astana had to travel a lot farther than most of its predecessors, who were members of the EU and NATO.

Kazakhstan's preparation took place on many levels. I would like to give a somewhat subjective overview of the main elements. It had both political and "technical" aspects. On the political side, some addressed the international environment, while others had domestic significance. On the international political front, Kazakhstan reassured its Western partners that it would continue with reforms aimed at making it more democratic and respectful of human rights. It also reassured Moscow that it would bring on board key issues of interest to the Russian Federation, including the securing of more attention for the politico-military dimension, resolving the current stalemate in European arms control, and prioritizing President Medvedev's European Security Treaty initiative.[6]

Domestic aspects of preparation included public-awareness initiatives. The Kazakh population learned a great deal about the OSCE and its importance. Kazakhstan made its Chairmanship a "national strategic project". However, it also effectively indoctrinated the population about the OSCE. It is possible to see this from two angles: On the one hand, it was encouraging that one state was finally heralding the OSCE as an important institution. On the other, however, the OSCE "loomed larger" in the Kazakh media than in reality, and the less informed Kazakh population could well gain the impression that Kazakhstan would be in charge of an international organization that decides major European policy issues. This positive spin contrasted starkly with the silence with which the Kazakh media greeted criticism of Kazakhstan's performance both before and after the Chairmanship in the areas of human rights, elections, and Astana's willingness to extend President Nazarbayev's term of office without an election.[7]

5 Cf. Decision No. 11/07, OSCE Chairmanships in 2009, 2010 and 2011, MC.DEC/11/07, 30 November 2007, in: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Fifteenth Meeting of the Ministerial Council*, 29 and 30 November 2007, Madrid, 30 November 2007, pp. 37-38, at: http://www.osce.org/mc/29488.

6 A good summary of this can be found in an article published by President Nursultan Nazarbayev in Russia. See his Sud'ba i perspektivy OBSE [Fortune and Prospects of the OSCE], in: *Izvestiya,* 28 January 2010. Reproduced in Bulat K. Sultanov (ed.), *Predsetatel'stvo Kazahstana v OBSE – Sbornik dokumentov i materialy* [Kazakhstan's OSCE Chairmanship – Documents and Materials]. Almaty 2011, pp. 21-33.

7 It is sufficient to mention the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission report, which, while noting improvements compared to earlier elections, concluded that "the election did not meet a number of OSCE commitments". OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and

In terms of "technical" preparation, Kazakhstan used those two years to find the right individuals to put its Chairmanship into practice. This included a professional team in Vienna and another in Astana, and an ambassador who would have been long enough in Vienna to become an OSCE insider by the start of the Chairmanship. There was also a need to train a fairly large team of junior diplomats, for which purpose Kazakhstan teamed up with one research centre in Germany, which has high level of competence in OSCE matters, and another in the US, which was made use of to fulfil certain political expectations. Last but not least, Kazakhstan integrated a Western ambassador into its team in Astana, who made a difference due to his insights on the OSCE. The last element of the team fell into place with the appointment of Kanat Saudabayev as foreign minister in September 2009. Kazakhstan allocated him the financial resources he needed to back his aspirations to run a successful Chairmanship. It is clear that he was appointed largely for the Chairmanship, and he left office in April 2011, not long after it had been completed. A number of other projects in Kazakhstan's national interest were also integrated with the OSCE Chairmanship, relating, for instance, to Afghanistan and assistance to Kyrgyzstan.

The foreign minister of Kazakhstan presented a total of fifteen priorities at the start of Kazakhstan's Chairmanship. They represented the following very broad array of matters:

1. comprehensive, collective, and indivisible security, particularly with reference to the Russian initiative on the European Security Treaty;
2. co-operation between the OSCE and other international organizations, particularly the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA);
3. adapting the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty);
4. assisting in the resolution of protracted conflicts;
5. supporting efforts towards nuclear disarmament;
6. focusing on the fight against illicit trafficking and terrorism;

Human Rights, *Republic of Kazakhstan, Parliamentry Elections, 18 August 2007, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*, Warsaw, 30 October 2007, p. 1, at: http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/28438. See also the response of the US chargé d'affaires – which has a strong emphasis on respect for human rights and a reminder of the importance of election monitoring – to the presentation of the OSCE Chairmanship programme by the Kazakh foreign minister: United States Mission to the OSCE, *Response to Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev, As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Carol Fuller to the Permanent Council*, Vienna, 14 January 2010, at: http://osce.usmission.gov/media/pdfs/2010-statements/st_011410_saudabayev.pdf. Finally, see also the highly critical piece by US Permanent Representative to the OSCE: United States Mission to the OSCE, *Statement on Plans for a Referendum in Place of Presidential Elections in Kazakhstan*, As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly to the Permanent Council, Vienna, 20 January 2011, at: http://photos.state.gov/libraries/osce/242783/2011/JAN-20-11_Kazakhstan.pdf.

7. a promise to pay particular attention to Afghanistan (an agreement has been signed to provide education at Kazakh universities for one thousand Afghan citizens);
8. promoting secure and efficient land transportation;
9. responding to environmental threats;
10. supporting the work of the three OSCE institutions: the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM), and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM);
11. promoting tolerance and intercultural dialogue;
12. improving mechanisms to combat trafficking in human beings;
13. promoting gender equality policy;
14. promoting the rule of law, particularly the independence of judicial systems;
15. emphasizing fundamental human rights and freedoms.[8]

If we take a closer look at these priorities, it is clear that the list is nearly as comprehensive as the agenda of the Organization itself, and hence demonstrates no focus at all. In some of these areas, such as nuclear disarmament and terrorism, the OSCE is a relatively marginal player, and other organizations have far more relevance. It is a fact, however that Kazakhstan has developed into an important actor in nuclear policy, and thus the emphasis on that issue may well be more a reflection of Kazakhstan's historically understandable "personal" interest than anything else.

Kazakhstan made an attempt to address all three dimensions of the Organization's activity. Within the economic and environmental dimension, it prioritized two issues: environmental threats and land transport. Once again, these are important issues for the entire continent, and have particular relevance for Kazakhstan and its neighbourhood. It is sufficient to mention the problems related to the Aral Sea and radiation contamination at Semipalatinsk. The great majority of the world's goods are traded via the oceans. Landlocked countries are disadvantaged, and the development of transport infrastructure may partly compensate for this. It is a fact, however that the OSCE as a forum may again not be the most suitable venue for this discussion, given its lack of resources and expertise.

The Kazakh Chairmanship had to face some criticism for not paying sufficient attention to the human dimension.[9] In a certain sense, it would be

8 Cf. OSCE, Kazakhstan 2010, *Statement of Mr. Kanat Saudabayev, Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE and Secretary of State and Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan at the 789th Meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council*, CIO.GAL/5/10, 14 January 2010.

9 This came both from the US and from the Spanish Presidency of the European Union. See *Response to Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev*, cited above (Note 7), and Spanish Presidency of the European Union, OSCE Permanent Council No. 789, Vienna,. 14 January 2010, *EU statement in response to the address by the Chairperson-in-Office, Secretary of State and Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, H.E. Kanat*

understandable if this were the case. Kazakhstan has long been one of the participating States that have advocated a "rebalancing" of the dimensions, first and foremost between the politico-military and the human. According to that group of states, this should be achieved by attributing more importance to the politico-military dimension. Far more significantly, however, Kazakhstan is a country that has been regularly criticized for its authoritarian political system, the shortcomings of its elections, and its lack of respect for fundamental freedoms. Although the criticism Astana has received in these areas has become increasingly moderate, particularly compared to that received by other Central Asian participating States, it is understandable that Kazakhstan did not want to prioritize issues that did not belong to its areas of particular strength. And while the criticism is well placed, Western democracies have to bear in mind that there are other elements of the human dimension which they have recently de-emphasized, including the free movement of persons, and economic and social rights. Here, the Kazakh Chairmanship made its own choice, and gave declared priority to matters such as the rule of law in relation to human rights, gender equality, and the combating of trafficking in human beings – a multi-dimensional issue that also has major human rights relevance. Last but not least, it paid lip-service to the issue of fundamental human rights and freedoms, which was the final element on Kazakhstan's list of priorities. One may assess this in two ways. It is possible to conclude that the attention the Kazakh Chair paid to human rights was indeed insufficient. However, it can also be argued that it placed the emphasis on other elements of the human dimension, thus merely shifting its previous emphasis on Western values.

It is important to pay attention to the verbs the Chairmanship uses, such as "assist", "support", "focus", "pay attention", "improve", "promote", and "emphasize". The use of language of this kind makes it incredibly difficult to measure the performance of the Chairmanship, and this may well have been Astana's intention. When performing functions of this kind, it can be advisable to avoid identifying easy-to-measure objectives.

It was clear from the priorities it laid out that Kazakhstan was trying to give a message to each of its key partners. This clearly reflected Kazakhstan's awareness that pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy is in its best interest. That may well be why the list of priorities presented was so long,

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Saudabayev, PC.DEL/4/10, 14 January 2010, at: http://www.delvie.ec.europa.eu/en/eu_osce/eu_statements/2010/January/Special PC no.789 - EU reply to CiO FM KAZ.pdf. The latter includes the following unambiguous statement: "[…] we believe we must also focus our work this year on other human dimension commitments, including those concerning human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic institutions and the rule of law. Other issues that the EU believes deserve particular attention this year include freedom of association and assembly, freedom of expression and media, respect for human rights in fighting terrorism, prevention of torture and abolition of the death penalty, and – as you mentioned – the rule of law. We would like to see all these issues reflected in the OSCE calendar of events for 2010" (p. 5). The EU further emphasized how important it was that all participating States make use of the election observation mechanism available through ODIHR.

although it had to be clear that only a few could ultimately be realized. The question of whether states pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy have the necessary freedom of action to be in charge of a consensus-based international organization in which most or all of their main partners are sitting around the table may sound entirely hypothetical. However, it is prudent to mention that the OSCE Chairmanship is more of a challenge for states with a multi-vector foreign policy that navigates between East and West than it is for states that are firmly anchored on one side or the other. Indeed, the Chairmanships of the latter may well be a challenge for those that do not belong to the same group.[10]

When presenting the objectives of its OSCE Chairmanship in January 2010, Kazakhstan took an entirely novel approach. The presentation by the country's foreign minister in Vienna was preceded by a video message sent by President Nursultan Nazarbayev. It is not unknown for the foreign ministers of Chairmanship states to have difficulty in making clear to their superiors – heads of state or government – that, although technically subordinate to the latter, it is the minister of foreign affairs who is in charge of the country's Chairmanship. In the case of Kazakhstan, this was utterly predictable: If it is a national project of great importance, a project to demonstrate that Kazakhstan is heading in the right direction and that it is a leader in its region, then it will be identified with the person of the president, as has been the case since independence. On the other hand, however, the president's message was an unnecessary reminder of how centralized political power is in the country and the fact that a presidential system may conflict with the foreign minister's role as Chairperson-in-Office. The intervention by the president was not necessary, as this was not a communication to the Kazakh people, who have been taught to identify the Kazakh state with its founding president, but to the narrow circle of OSCE delegates.

The Three Non-Concentric Circles: Pan-European, Regional, and Domestic

When analysing the results and the achievements of the Kazakh Chairmanship, it is necessary to focus on three elements: What has Kazakhstan achieved for the OSCE area as a whole, including the Organization itself? What has it achieved for Central Asia – or, more broadly, the post-Soviet space? And finally, what has it achieved for the Kazakh state and its people?

From the list of achievements for the whole OSCE area, including the Organization itself, it is undeniable that no breakthrough has been achieved. The Organization did not find a new lease of life during the Kazakh Chairmanship, the balance of the three dimensions did not change noticeably,

10 It suffices to mention that the Slovenian Chairman-in-Office, Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, faced protests from some states, including Russia, when he commented on the Andijan (Uzbekistan) massacre in his OSCE function.

European arms control did not move out of the stalemate, nor – and this is closely related – did the suspended CFE Treaty return to operation. The economic and environmental dimension did not gain in importance and, understandably, the human dimension did not flourish. This balance is very similar to that of many previous Chairmanships.

However, there was one notable change in the life of the OSCE. The Kazakh president declared that his country would like to host an OSCE Summit Meeting during 2010. It would have been difficult to object to such an initiative when the Helsinki Summit Meeting declared back in 1992 that "Meetings of Heads of State or Government […] will take place, as a rule every two years on the occasion of review conferences".[11] Yet no Summit Meeting had been held since 1999. Eleven years later, it was evident that there was no easy way to argue against holding another Summit. The request was made as early as January by the Kazakh president and his foreign minister. Initial reactions were cautious, as it was difficult to identify the purpose the meeting would fulfil.[12] The early announcement turned out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, other participating States had time to digest the idea and to be exposed to Kazakhstan's arguments and effective lobbying in favour of its own initiative. On the other hand, however, by making its declaration four weeks after the start of its Chairmanship, Astana created a situation in which it had to make concessions to those partners that could block the realization of its intentions. Before concluding that the early proposal and strong advocacy of a Summit was a mistake, we should take an independent look and ask whether, by doing so, Kazakhstan had to compromise any of its Chairmanship objectives. Surprisingly, the response may well be in the negative. This is because the Kazakh Chairmanship did not have any objectives that would have required it to compromise. In fact, the Summit itself soon became Kazakhstan's most important objective. Other strongly held objectives could either be implemented by Kazakhstan on its own (training of Afghan citizens, extra-budgetary project assistance to Kyrgyzstan), or, as in the case of the plan to hold a few meetings on inter-civilizational dialogue, could be supported because of their uncontroversial nature. Initially because the content of the Summit remained enigmatic – which, to some extent, remained the case even after it had taken place – it was described as a "kick-off Summit" that should lead to further development of the OSCE. When the Summit eventually took place, it adopted the Astana Commemorative Declaration and stopped short of passing an action plan.[13] The document adopted is not particularly novel. The mere fact that it

11 CSCE Helsinki Document 1992: The Challenges of Change, Helsinki 10 July 1992, in: Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972-1993*, Dordrecht 1993, pp. 701-777, here: p. 711, also available at: http://www.osce.org/mc/39530.

12 Cf. Steven Castle, Kazakhstan uses its voice as leader of O.S.C.E., in: *International Herald Tribune,* 28 January 2010, p. 3.

13 For more details, see two critical, or at least sceptical assessments of the Summit: Andrei Zagorski, The Astana Summit Has Left the OSCE in a State of Limbo, and Wolfgang

reaffirmed "all […] OSCE documents to which we have agreed"[14] was presented as a major achievement, but this also says a lot about the state of affairs in the Organization. Indeed, it was difficult to achieve even this reconfirmation, as the optimism and enthusiasm regarding the prospects of Europe, as well as the conditions under which the various documents were originally adopted, no longer prevail.

In the regional context, Kazakhstan promised to put Central Asia "on the map", to raise the region's profile, and to counterbalance the simplified view of it as a region of authoritarian regimes, if not outright dictatorships. It also promised to generate more attention for Afghanistan, a country that may well belong to Central Asia in the long run and is a neighbour of three OSCE participating States (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Both ideas were timely, not least because the scheduled withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, or their massive numerical reduction, may significantly increase the risk posed to the three neighbours (and others).

Regional matters were understandably high on the Chairmanship agenda, as that is where Kazakhstan promised to make a difference. Simultaneously, Kazakhstan found itself in the delicate situation of having to define its relationship to the region. While it was willing to demonstrate its ability to take on a regional leadership role, it did not want to be absorbed into the region and regarded as one of "those". Astana needed to differentiate itself from the other Central Asian states by stressing its own otherness, but without separating itself from the region. This was, beyond doubt, a very difficult act to pull off. Kazakhstan has always claimed to be different from the rest of Central Asia, and not without reason. As Dariga Nazarbayeva put it: "Geographically, Kazakhstan borders on Central Asia, but it is not a Central Asian country. Ours is an Eurasian state strongly influenced by Europe and Western values. Contrary to what certain politicians and journalists assert, we are not another *-stan.* Saudi Arabia is not our historical landmark: we look to Norway, South Korea, and Singapore."[15] Consequently, the traditional differentiation between *"Srednaya Azia"* (Middle Asia) and Kazakhstan may well return, replacing the use of *"Tsentralnaya Azia"* (Central Asia), of which Kazakhstan is considered a part. It is a fact, however, that it is not only Kazakhstan that is attempting to "flee" from Central Asia. Turkmenistan, the other main hydrocarbon exporter in the region, occasionally identifies itself

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Zellner, The 2010 Astana Summit: An Initial Assessment, both in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2010,* Baden-Baden, 2011, pp. 31-34 and 23-30, respectively.

14 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Summit Meeting, Astana 2010, *Astana Commemorative Declaration – Towards a Security Community*, SUM.DOC/1/10/Corr.1, 3 December 2010, section 2, at: http://www.osce.org/mc/74985.

15 Dariga Nazarbayeva, Spetsifika i Perspektivy Politicheskovo Razvitiya Kazakhstana [Peculiarity and Prospects of Kazakhstan's Political Development], 3 December 2003, at: http://www.iimp.kz/Lists/articles/DispForm.aspx?ID=766 (author's translation; emphasis added).

as a "Caspian state", and is thus another prosperous country that is attempting to "vacate" Central Asia, leaving the region to its backwardness.

Despite Uzbekistan's claims, Kazakhstan is beyond doubt the most important player in the region. It represents more than two-thirds of Central Asian territory and GDP, has a large natural resource base, particularly in hydrocarbons, and is the only state with a somewhat acceptable governance structure. Uzbekistan has claimed a leadership role on strategic grounds, but has none of the above features except for a large population base.

Chairmanship countries usually hope that events will not interfere with their plans during their term. It is seldom the case, however, that nothing major happens in Europe. The challenge for Kazakhstan came in its near neighbourhood in the form of Kyrgyzstan's second regime change and the subsequent ethnic clashes in the south of the country. Kazakhstan thus faced a crisis in the region with which it was most familiar. This was certainly an advantage that should be appreciated. Bearing in mind how little familiarity there is with Central Asia in Europe as a whole, this contrasts strongly with how one can only imagine events may have unfolded had the Chairmanship been held by a small European state with no presence and expertise in the region. In dealing with this crisis, Kazakhstan very much had "home advantage". When events got out of hand in Bishkek in April, when the clashes resulted in more than 80 casualties, Astana provided the necessary "technical assistance". Kazakhstan airlifted the ousted Kyrgyz president, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, out of the south of the country and assisted him in travelling on to his new permanent home in Minsk. He was actually "invited for talks" by the president of Kazakhstan. Bakiyev agreed to give up power on the condition that his personal safety was guaranteed. In fact, Kazakhstan would have done the same in a national capacity, as it had helped the previous Kyrgyz president, Askar Akayev, to depart from Bishkek and travel to Russia five years earlier. Though Kazakhstan's role in the events entailed a number of risks, on the whole Astana did precisely what it had to – whether Chairperson of the OSCE or not.

The situation was far more complex for Astana thereafter, and Kazakhstan's record became more mixed. The new leadership of Kyrgyzstan had difficulties establishing itself, and Kazakhstan played an ambiguous role in its efforts. Kazakh diplomacy was very supportive of the new Kyrgyz leadership, and consistently announced in public that Astana "trusts the wisdom of the Kyrgyz leadership". Less diplomatic language was possibly used behind closed doors. What may have mattered more than words was actions in the field. Acting in its national capacity, and notwithstanding its Chairmanship role, Kazakhstan took the following steps: 1. It closed the border right after the 7 April events in Bishkek and did not reopen it until 20 May. Whether there was a need to keep the border closed for such an extensive period remains open to doubt, particularly since President Nazarbayev and Rosa Otunbayeva, then acting prime minister, later president, allegedly already

agreed on the telephone on 4 May to reopen the border. The closure was particularly unhelpful, since most of Kyrgyzstan's northbound exports usually pass through Kazakhstan. Furthermore, it exacerbated the humanitarian situation by shutting out both Kyrgyz workers and migrant traders from the Kazakh market. 2. President Nazarbayev was not ready to receive Otunbayeva until she was actually sworn into office. If nowhere else, here Astana's two roles definitely collided. While reservations of this kind are normally respected in international diplomacy, the refusal was inappropriate coming from the state that held the OSCE Chairmanship and was tasked with contributing to mitigating the internal conflict. 3. Kazakhstan later made an extrabudgetary contribution to help with Kyrgyzstan's recovery. It is open to question whether this could compensate for the severe road transit-related losses caused by the closure of the border with Kyrgyzstan for 43 days.

The next conflict arose with the outbreak of ethnic clashes in June in the south of Kyrgyzstan. The "ethnic cleansing" killed around 470 people, three-quarters of them Uzbeks. As a consequence, approximately 400,000 people fled towards the Uzbek border in June 2010, and 100,000 of them eventually made it to Uzbekistan. They were overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, of Uzbek ethnicity. The leadership of Uzbekistan ordered the border to be opened, and three days later the flow of asylum seekers reversed. The conflict was not resolved, and the OSCE's attempt to establish a Police Advisory Group was effectively blocked by local forces. That said more about power relations inside Kyrgyzstan than about the capacity of the OSCE Chairmanship to manage the crisis and contribute to post-conflict reconciliation.

It would not be very objective to say that it was sheer luck that we got away without a far more severe internal crisis in June 2010 – one that could easily have taken on increasingly international proportions. However, a closer look would reduce the importance we attribute to coincidence. The Uzbek leadership basically had no choice but to open the border with Kyrgyzstan. If this had not been done, it could have caused an internal ethnic conflict of unpredictable magnitude in Kyrgyzstan. This was the last thing that Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, who is not particularly well regarded in Europe for his country's human rights record, needed. When, as a consequence, a hundred thousand people arrived on Uzbek territory it was Uzbekistan's natural instinct to get rid of them as soon as possible. Here, certain personal experiences of President Karimov came into play. The president, who has experience of managing internal conflict effectively – if not always peacefully – wanted to avoid instability in the Ferghana Valley, where he had already faced challenges, both in the 1990s, when angry demonstrators protested against him, and also in 2005, when he escaped serious trouble over Andijan partly because people involved in the local conflict escaped to Kyrgyzstan. The flight, in turn, of Uzbek refugees from Kyrgyzstan helped to end the acute phase of the conflict. Hence, in order to guarantee that Uzbekistan could preserve its stability President Karimov had to "re-export" the

problem, or at least the unpredictability, into Kyrgyzstan. This is what happened, and the process of reconciliation in the south of the country is still slow and difficult. Where there was some good fortune was in the following: 1. the Uzbek leadership's desire – born from experience – to avoid instability and give priority to conflict avoidance; 2. Uzbekistan and its president's specific and genuine lack of interest in entering into a conflict with Kyrgyzstan while desiring to further improve its tarnished international image.

The Kazakh and Uzbek presidents have very different memories of how the crisis was managed by the OSCE. According to Islam Karimov, "the organization failed to prevent the conflict", whereas, according to President Nazarbayev, "Kazakhstan has tried to use all available OSCE instruments to prevent the escalation of the conflict".[16] Interestingly, the two statements are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Kazakhstan (together with some other states) did try to prevent the conflict from escalating and spreading from Kyrgyzstan. Although this did not succeed, one has to bear in mind how difficult it was to address effectively a crisis that was evolving rapidly and with a degree of unpredictability. The ethnic cleansing and inter-ethnic clashes reached a level that resulted in massive population movement so rapidly that no diplomatic means could be used. This, however, indicated that the OSCE, similarly to many other institutions, has difficulty in effectively intervening in a fast-evolving acute crisis, just as it does in protracted conflicts. Yet this disappointment is not due to any lapse on Kazakhstan's part.

The Kazakh Chairmanship's effort to fulfil its promise of putting Central Asia on the map took a rather strange course. Regrettably, the Kyrgyz crisis and its spillover to Uzbekistan raised the profile of the region more than Kazakhstan's sincere effort to portray itself – and by extension the region as a whole – in the best light possible. The old rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan also influenced the OSCE. President Karimov stayed away from the Astana Summit, though the Uzbek foreign minister was there to "spoil" Kazakhstan's party. Last but not least, Uzbekistan also insisted that the OSCE should not engage with Afghanistan. This was again partly linked to the Kazakh Chairmanship. Even more important was Uzbekistan's proposal to establish a multilateral framework (6+3) in which Tashkent would have greater relevance than in the OSCE, an organization not greatly appreciated in Tashkent. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan contributed to putting Afghanistan on the OSCE agenda more than ever, expressing its support when it declared: "We have begun implementing President Nursultan Nazarbayev's initiative for an educational programme to train Afghan young people at higher and vocational educational institutions in Kazakhstan. The first 200

16 Both cited by Erica Marat, OSCE Summit Highlights Disagreements between Astana and Tashkent, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor,* 2 December 2010, at: http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews[tt_news]=37235&tx_ttnews[backPid]=27&cHash=8cd4c7e593.

students will take up their studies this year. Kazakhstan has allocated 50 million US dollars for these purposes."[17]

It is clear from the above that Kazakhstan's Chairmanship could not change the course of the OSCE, and its regional efforts could at best be regarded as partly successful. None of the achievements in either area could be fully attributed to Kazakh efforts. In fact, this outcome was largely due to the fact that the OSCE, in accordance with the will of its participating States, held out against rejuvenation for quite a long time. There was also a certain faction opposed to Kazakhstan's standing out as a regional leader.

Thus, it still remains to determine what the Kazakh Chairmanship has achieved for the country's own interests in terms of its international standing and the internal political situation. These two are not unrelated. Kazakhstan has demonstrated above all that it is able to conduct a responsible task of this kind. It had the vision, the determination, and the resources to carry it out effectively. It did not run a worse Chairmanship than any of its predecessors.[18] With its involvement in the management of the Kyrgyz crisis, particularly in April 2010, Kazakhstan demonstrated the advantage of having a state in charge that was familiar with the reality on the ground. By convening the Astana Summit, it placed the OSCE in the spotlight for a brief moment. At the same time, Astana also put itself on the map, thus serving its self-interest.

Kazakhstan has developed rapidly, though unevenly. Economically, it benefits from a wealth of natural resources, which makes many things easier. Prosperity makes governance less troublesome, certainly in terms of resource allocation. Political dissatisfaction can be mitigated by prosperity, and the level of dissatisfaction has remained controllable. The correlative of this, however, is that states in such a situation, including Kazakhstan, can delay reform, including political liberalization. In fact, Kazakhstan has projected the image of a country that is measuredly authoritarian and has not felt the need to overreact in order to guarantee domestic stability. The expectations of the OSCE community towards Kazakhstan in terms of democracy and respect for human rights have been mitigated by paying attention to a number of other problems and, just as importantly, by the quest for domestic and regional stability. In sum, while Kazakhstan was fortunate not to expose itself to a worsening human rights situation during the Chairmanship, there was no noticeable improvement in its record. This could lead to two conclusions: 1. Kazakhstan did not live up to the many promises it regularly made between 2003 and 2009 in preparation for the Chairmanship. This is disappointing. 2. The change of the human rights situation in a country is an organic process.

17 *Statement by Mr. Kanat Saudabayev, Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE and Secretary of State and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at the International Conference on Afghanistan (Kabul, 20 July 2010)*, at: http://www.kazakhstan-osce.org/content/statement-mr-kanat-saudabayev-chairman-office-osce-and-secretary-state-and-minister-foreign-0.

18 More recently, between June 2011 and June 2012, Kazakhstan is chairing the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and is thus practising multilateral diplomacy from the driving seat once again.

The growth in respect for human rights can only be speeded up by external factors to a certain degree.

The Kazakh leadership was very well aware that there was only one OSCE participating State that could spoil the Kazakh Chairmanship by itself: the United States. No other country was in a position to do this on its own. The EU does not have the necessary unity, and, for others, Kazakhstan would have been an inappropriate target. The US was most demanding at the time when the Chairmanship was (belatedly) granted and had been instrumentally innovative in finding a stop-gap Chairmanship country (Greece), thereby delaying Kazakhstan's taking the helm. Against this backdrop, the Kazakh foreign minister appointed especially for the Chairmanship was an experienced professional with significant familiarity inside the Washington beltway. Last but not least, shortly before the Astana Summit, when Kazakhstan was in the limelight, it announced its forthcoming participation in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. It appears that, with this, Kazakhstan wished to silence any possible US criticism of Astana's human rights record. This effort proved largely successful, and Kazakhstan oddly retreated from its Afghanistan commitment not much later.

For the Kazakh people, the Chairmanship did not matter much in the sense of changing their lives or Kazakh society. Yet for the "man in the street", it mattered in a symbolic sense. It contributed to the sense of national pride that was also being fostered by the leadership, for instance, in its emphasis on the Summit. Moreover, it did matter for the growing maturity and gradual emancipation of the Kazakh political establishment. In sum, Kazakhstan has contributed very effectively to the symbolic affirmation of its desired international profile and to national consolidation through political symbolism.

Conclusions

The rotating Chairmanship of the OSCE fulfils more of a facilitator function than anything else. Hence, it is unfounded to assume that a Chairmanship country could change the course of the Organization on its own. That's why taking the Chairmanship is to some extent a leap in the dark. When assessing the Kazakh Chairmanship, it is better to put the question differently, and ask whether Kazakhstan has achieved the maximum that could be achieved under the given conditions. There are those who remain dissatisfied for one of two reasons (or for both): 1. The OSCE has not become a more vibrant organization. 2. Kazakhstan has not become a democracy under the rule of law. These reservations may be well founded. However, nobody with a clear mind could have expected either of those extreme expectations to be fulfilled. I do not find it particularly persuasive to measure the performance of the Kazakh Chairmanship in such terms.

If we change the level of analysis, there is every reason to conclude that Kazakhstan ran a Chairmanship that was no worse than those of its predecessors. It made a unique contribution to the OSCE by convening the first Summit Meeting for eleven years and managed the Kyrgyz crisis of 2010 to the best of its ability. Astana did not resolve its major regional rivalry but successfully managed it so that it would not interfere much with the Chairmanship. Kazakhstan skilfully manipulated its potentially difficult partner so that it could not interfere with the former's dearest objective: presenting itself (and, to some extent, Central Asia as a whole) in a positive light, and, hence, positioning Kazakhstan internationally for the future. Above all, Kazakhstan has strengthened its own international and internal identity and used the Chairmanship for identity politics. It stressed its "Eurasianness" without giving priority to one geographical dimension or the other. It also contributed to its image as a state that can persuade partners to follow it and a country that can perform in an international leadership position. Domestically, the image it has generated has contributed to Kazakh national pride and may be regarded as an aspect of nation-building. In sum, Kazakhstan had a unique Chairmanship that may have been superficially reminiscent of many earlier ones in terms of what was achieved, but was very different in terms of its subsidiary effects.