

Little Room for Maneuver: Belgium Assumes OSCE Chairmanship

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Belgium took over the rotating chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on January 1. In the coming twelve months it will now be up to Foreign Minister Karel de Gucht to restore consensus on the OSCE's institutional structure and remit, which seems to have crumbled in recent months. Major differences between member states overshadowed the 30th anniversary of the CSCE process in August 2005 and the annual meeting of the Ministerial Council in December 2005 in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana. The three most contentious areas of policy, and consequentially the greatest challenges for the Belgian chairmanship, are the process of internal reform of the OSCE, observance of promises made by members in the field of conflict resolution, and the future of the OSCE election monitoring missions.

In June 2005 both the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE and the Panel of Eminent Persons from seven member states appointed in 2004 by the Ministerial Council independently published proposals for institutional reform. Starting from the premise that in recent years problems have arisen in the organization's effectiveness and consequently also its political clout, both reports called for action to strengthen the institution of the OSCE Secretary General and increase the political weight of the Chairman-in-Office at the expense of the influence of member states. The goal of the proposals is to safeguard the OSCE's ability to respond quickly and effectively to crises.

Another reform proposal suggests relaxing the OSCE's consensual decision-making principles to allow majority voting on personnel, budgetary, and administrative matters, and to compel the country blocking agreement to justify its position publicly in order to increase the political pressure to reach a consensus.

On this point in particular, Russia stands almost alone, because the call to modify the consensus principle is fueled above all by its policies, which in recent years have been largely responsible for blocking numerous OSCE decisions and for the failure to agree a joint final declaration at the Ministerial Council meeting in Ljubljana (and at the two previous meetings in 2003 and 2004).

A majority of member states supports the proposals to modify the voting mechanisms.

In this context it must be seen as a success that the budget dispute provoked by Russia at the beginning of 2005 was resolved (or at least prevented from flaring up again) and that the Ministerial Council was able to agree a Roadmap for Reform to strengthen the OSCE's effectiveness. At the same time, however, no consensus has yet emerged on what political purpose reform of the OSCE should serve. Should the model be a Euro-Atlantic security institution serving state security or an organization supporting the processes of political and social transformation and committed to "human security"?

Russia's Promise to Withdraw from Transdniestria and Georgia

The Belgian Chairman-in-Office will inherit another problem from his predecessors. The failure of the Ministerial Council meeting in December 2005 to agree a final declaration (as in the two preceding years) stemmed largely from disagreement over the fulfillment of Moscow's promises to withdraw its troops from Georgia and from the breakaway Transdniestria region in the Republic of Moldova. The OSCE has been present in both territories since the early 1990s and has a mandate to participate actively in efforts to find political solutions for these separatist conflicts. At the 1999 meeting of OSCE heads of state and government, Russia agreed to complete the troop withdrawals by 2001. Although Moscow reached agreement in principle with Georgia on May 30, 2005, to successively withdraw its troops, in the case of Transdniestria the Russians have neither kept their side of the withdrawal agreement nor is there any prospect of a political agreement between the Moldovan government, the separatist leadership in Tiraspol, and the Kremlin. In this question, too, Russia is largely isolated from great majority of OSCE member states. The United States and

the European Union members insisted on the Russian troop withdrawal obligations being mentioned again in the Ministerial Council's final declaration, which was then blocked by Russia.

OSCE Election Observers: Victims of Their Own Success?

Conflict over the OSCE's election observer missions has been smoldering for years and also presents a special challenge for the Belgian Chairmanship. During the past year Russia and a number of other post-Soviet states (including Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan) have repeatedly called for the OSCE to pay less attention to election monitoring, adherence to democratic standards in member states and observance of human rights. Their criticism is directed above all at the activities of the OSCE's Warsaw-based Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), whose critical election reports played an important role in the political transformations in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. Currently led by Austrian diplomat Christian Strohal, the ODIHR's duties encompass the whole many-faceted "human dimension" of the OSCE, including not just election monitoring but also strengthening democratic institutions, protecting human rights, and fighting racism and anti-Semitism in member states.

The ODIHR-critical members also complain about the OSCE's geographical bias, saying that the organization concerns itself almost exclusively with the states of central and eastern Europe, while doing little or nothing in western Europe and North America. Instead of interfering in the internal affairs of member states through its election observers, they say, the OSCE should be guided back to its CSCE roots as a security-building institution and should pursue security policy in the traditional sense (confidence- and security-building measures, arms control) as well as meeting the new security challenges.

Accordingly, this group of states called

for the ODIHR's activities to be placed under the control of the governments of the 55 member states. This would have stopped the OSCE election observers publishing their reports directly after an election; instead they would first have had to present them to the Permanent Council of OSCE ambassadors, which would have had to agree unanimously on publication. In practical terms this would have given a regime that had prevented the holding of free and fair elections a veto over the publication of the ODIHR report. The OSCE's election observer missions, which are one of the organization's most important and effective instruments, would have become largely irrelevant. Russia and certain other post-Soviet states are targeting the missions precisely because they have been so successful in recent years.

For the moment the representatives of the European Union and the United States have been able to hold their line of "inviolability." They say that although the agreement that was reached provides for the ODIHR to report to the Permanent Council, it ultimately leaves unscathed the independence of this OSCE special institution. This formal resolution of the conflict has merely postponed the substantive decision. The next observer missions in post-Soviet states, for example in March 2006 in Belarus, will probably draw more of the same kind of criticism, which the Belgian Chairmanship will then have to deal with.

Competition from Other International Organizations

Member states' differing positions on the OSCE's future responsibilities are associated almost automatically with diverging views on its importance. Whereas, for example, the United States and the states of the European Union have always emphasized the importance of the OSCE with reference to its transforming power, the Kremlin regards it as an organization in crisis that no longer serves Russian interests. Moscow

has consequently started upgrading alternative security forums in the shape of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

The CSTO was set up in 2003 and corresponds more closely to Russian ideas of governance, on the one hand because it perpetuates Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet region as its system of collective security, and on the other because it is based on a strict principle of non-intervention in members' internal affairs. For that reason the CSTO does not deal either with the OSCE's "human dimension," its broad complex of fundamental freedoms and human rights. In the interests of demarcating spheres of influence, Moscow has been working since summer 2004 to enhance the status of the CSTO by pressing NATO to establish institutional relations and thus to implicitly recognize Russia's hegemonic role in the post-Soviet region.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded in 2001, dedicates itself primarily to fighting terrorism and cross-border crime and in the process attempts implicitly to curb American influence in central Asia. Although it does not consolidate a long-term hegemonic role for Russia in this region, by sending its own election observer missions—whose reports have generally turned out to be considerably less critical than those of the OSCE—it has entered into direct competition with the ODIHR, and relativizes its activities in accordance with Russian wishes. Unlike the OSCE, the SCO member states do not take a shared normative orientation (observing democratic standards and guaranteeing human rights) as the foundation on which to base their cooperation.

Quo Vadis OSCE?

If the OSCE is to remain an effective security instrument for Europe as a whole rather than sliding into insignificance, the Belgian Chairmanship and Germany will have to continue to ensure that the

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OSCE's institutions—first and foremost the ODIHR—are not weakened by institutional compromises. Criticism from post-Soviet states notwithstanding, there are no substantive grounds to enter such compromises. Back in 1991 the member states stated—as their shared normative foundation—that questions of human rights, democracy, and rule of law were an international concern and that observing these norms was consequently not exclusively an internal matter for individual states. Eroding this consensus would not only represent the first step toward undermining the norms of the OSCE, it would also rob the organization of its most effective instruments.

At the same time however, the western-leaning post-Soviet states, especially, must be brought into long-term cooperation in the OSCE. For them, in view of the limited alternatives, the organization is already an important forum for security cooperation, one which gains them much louder voice in international diplomacy than they would receive on their own merit. In order to give these states even greater incentives to pursue a course of ongoing cooperation, the German government should work to readjust the balance between the OSCE's social, political/military, and economic dimensions. This cannot mean complicity with Russian policies that effectively aim to undermine the “human dimension.” But if Russia and other post-Soviet states are to be persuaded to cooperate long-term in the field of the “human dimension” it will be necessary to maintain—and where possible increase—their interest in the OSCE by showing the potential benefits of cooperation.

Consequently one of the central challenges for the Belgian Chairmanship and German OSCE policy will be to make the organization more strongly a multi-dimensional security institution again, in whose activity profile elements of political, military, and economic cooperation regain prominence alongside the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

An expansion of the so far rudimentary cooperation in fighting international terrorism, reviving arms control and disarmament activities, and breathing life into the virtually non-existent economic cooperation could represent the appropriate first steps.