

## The OSCE chairmanship – Kazakhstan's self-promotion campaign?

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In January 2010, Kazakhstan took over the chairmanship of the OSCE. This marks the first time that the Organisation has been led by a post-Soviet, Asian and Muslim country. At the same time the OSCE, whose mission includes promoting democracy, is being chaired by an authoritarian state where the Organisation has never recognised a ballot as meeting European standards. Kazakhstan has been entrusted with the OSCE's chairmanship in recognition of its regional and international position as a country which, within less than twenty years of independence, has thoroughly modernised and reached an economic development level enabling it to conduct a relatively independent, ambitious foreign policy, all without any social unrest.

The Kazakh chairmanship will entail a shift in the OSCE's priorities – Kazakhstan stands a chance of becoming a 'spokescountry' for Central Asia, or even the entire CIS, to the West. This could prompt the Organisation to devote more attention to issues of importance for the area (especially security questions), and less to the OSCE's traditional priority, namely efforts to promote democracy.

The fact that Kazakhstan is chairing the OSCE means a huge success in prestige for Astana, and it is perceived mainly in these terms in Kazakhstan, as a chance to further promote the country.

### Why Kazakhstan?

Kazakhstan was awarded the chairmanship after five years of intensive efforts during which it underlined its achievements with regard to modernisation according to Western models, while at the same time suggesting that refusal might prompt Astana to stop developing co-operation with the West and opt for a rapprochement with Russia and China instead. The country was finally accepted during the OSCE foreign ministers' meeting on 30 November 2007 in Madrid, where the then Kazakh foreign minister Marat Tajin made a commitment on behalf of Astana to carry out a number of political reforms before Kazakhstan took over the chairmanship (the so-called Madrid commitments, see below). Astana has been using the confidence in Kazakhstan demonstrated by the OSCE in Madrid as a proof of its reliability towards European states.

Astana has been awarded the chairmanship in recognition of its exceptional position in the CIS. Having gained independence less than two decades ago, Kazakhstan has succeeded in building a stable state and a dynamic economy which has been increasingly developing in

areas other than the raw-materials sector. As such, the country has no peer in Central Asia. The degree of Kazakhstan's integration with the global economy and its economic growth rate, as well as its efficacy at combating the crisis during the last two years, have been the measures of the country's success<sup>1</sup>. Kazakhstan is the largest oil producer and exporter in the Caspian region, and has the largest growth potential with regard to both production and exports. It is now already the European Union's main trade partner in Central Asia, and prospects of further developing economic co-operation between Kazakhstan and the West are attractive to both sides. Kazakhstan is also distinguished by its active, multi-vectoral and non-confrontational foreign policy. Astana has been the driving force behind regional initiatives, including the water agreement among all the five Central Asian states, and the co-ordination of the gas policies of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. However, its ambitions go beyond not only Central Asia, but also beyond the CIS. In recent years, Kazakhstan has adopted a more assertive stance in relation to both Russia and the West, and has been intensively developing its co-operation with China. By balancing the influence of those three key players in Central Asia, Astana has been able to pursue its strategic interests, namely expanding the production and transit potential of its energy sector, without antagonising any of the three.

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Awarding the chairmanship to Kazakhstan was a gesture to the post-Soviet states, a demonstration of equality between the new and the old OSCE members. The West hoped that Astana would be able not only to avert the threats to the Organisation's unity, but also to boost stability in Central Asia. At the time the decision was being taken in Madrid, the participants also keenly hoped that the chairmanship would become an impulse for genuine democratisation in Kazakhstan.

The support of Russia has also been important for the election of Kazakhstan as the OSCE chair. When lobbying for Astana, Moscow hoped that Kazakhstan would become an advocate of its concept of the OSCE's development, and that Russia's influence in Kazakhstan would enable Moscow to strengthen its own position within the Organisation. It seems, however, that Kazakhstan will try to emphasise its independence and autonomy, and will not be reduced to the role of an exponent of Russian interests, even if those interests are in line with its own (such as shifting the emphasis to security issues at the expense of supervision of political and election processes). If Kazakhstan does back Russian initiatives, this will be as a result of precise calculations on the former's part.

Finally, Astana's determination in building up a positive image of Kazakhstan in the West has also played a role. This has manifested itself in the measures Kazakhstan undertook both before the OSCE's 2007 decision awarding the chairmanship, and afterwards. Using US-based lobbying companies, Astana succeeded in, inter alia, having the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute (John Hopkins University) prepare and publish three reports on the situation in Kazakhstan in 2008. In 2009, it signed a year-long contract with a US lobbying company which was tasked mainly with enhancing Kazakhstan's image. Astana has also awarded a grant for the implementation of a joint project by two US-based think-tanks (IND and CSIS),

<sup>1</sup> Over the last decade, the GDP of Kazakhstan remained above 9%, falling to 8.9% in 2007 and 3.2% in 2008. The IMF had predicted that it would decrease to -2% in 2009; however, according to preliminary data, Kazakhstan has managed to keep its GDP growth in the positive range thanks to growing industrial production. Astana has declined the financial aid offered by the IMF, but instead accepted a loan from China which was spent on implementing energy projects of key importance to Kazakhstan and China. As a result of the welfare measures undertaken as part of the anti-crisis programme, no rise in social discontent has been observed in Kazakhstan to date.

which were in charge of formulating the recommendations for the governments of Kazakhstan and the United States in connection with the Kazakh chairmanship<sup>2</sup>.

## Reservations concerning Kazakhstan's candidacy

Kazakhstan's failure to abide by democratic principles and its human-rights violations have been the most important obstacles to the award of the OSCE chairmanship.

During the OSCE ministerial meeting in Madrid, Kazakhstan was obligated to reform its election laws, liberalise the rules for the registration of political parties and amend its media law in line with the OSCE's recommendations, before taking over the chairmanship. Kazakhstan has been assuring the OSCE that it has delivered on those commitments. However, in reality the reforms implemented during the two years that have passed since the Madrid meeting have done little to expand civil liberties in Kazakhstan. Moreover, an amendment to the media law which steps up control of the Internet was enacted last year, and a debate has been launched about making Nursultan Nazarbayev president for life without having to hold successive elections. Furthermore, one of Kazakhstan's best-known human rights

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activists, Evgeny Zhovtis, was sentenced to four years in prison for causing a traffic accident in which a pedestrian died, although the OSCE had raised serious reservations concerning the trial.

The award of the OSCE chairmanship to Kazakhstan ultimately proves that the incompatibility of the Kazakh political model

with European standards is not an impediment to the country's international aspirations. On the other hand, the fact that the way in which Kazakhstan has fulfilled its commitments has been approved of means that the country has been in fact granted the right to interpret the principles of democracy as it finds convenient, even if this has little to do with democracy itself.

## The priorities of the Kazakh chairmanship

Kazakhstan views its chairmanship of the OSCE mainly as a prestige-building measure, and consequently will try to use it as a kind of year-long self-promotion campaign.

Kazakhstan's assumption of the OSCE chairmanship was preceded by a large-scale PR campaign. The great importance that national prestige has was also apparent in the speeches by the Kazakh foreign minister at the OSCE foreign ministers' conference in Athens (1–2 December 2009), which were treated as programme statements. The addresses by Minister Saudabayev, in which he underlined the immense importance that Astana attaches to democratisation and vividly described Kazakhstan's plans for the OSCE leadership, suggest that Astana will use the coming year to build up the image of Kazakhstan as a dynamically developing country,

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a responsible member of the international community, and the author of numerous initiatives within the OSCE.

The Kazakh chairmanship should be expected to bring about a proliferation of conferences and summits, the final declarations of which will not necessarily produce any permanent tangible outcomes. For instance,

Astana has for some time been promoting the idea of organising a summit of the presidents of the OSCE member states in Kazakhstan, which would be devoted to international security

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see: [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org), [www.thehill.com](http://www.thehill.com), [www.abcnews.go.com](http://www.abcnews.go.com)

issues. Irrespective of its actual results, the meeting would mainly serve to strengthen Astana's prestige<sup>3</sup>. Although the initiative has so far only been backed by eight states, the Kazakh foreign minister has managed to persuade the ministers participating in the Athens meeting to include a provision expressing support for the summit initiative in the final declaration.

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Afghanistan, and the consequences of its location in the neighbourhood of Central Asia, may become the main theme of the Kazakh chairmanship. Astana has identified the situation in Afghanistan as one of the main external threats to security in Central Asia, and has declared that it will seek to step up the OSCE's involvement in reconstructing Afghanistan. Kazakhstan intends to implement anti-drug programmes (one major drug-smuggling route from Afghanistan to Europe leads via Central Asia and Russia), including projects designed to offer the Afghan people other ways of earning a living, as alternatives to the drug trade. The Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs has highlighted its own involvement in Afghanistan, which has been stepped up considerably in the run-up to taking over the chairmanship, and

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which includes the construction of schools and hospitals and the development of educational opportunities for the Afghan people as examples of such actions<sup>4</sup>.

Stabilisation in Afghanistan is equally important for Central Asia, Russia and the West. From Kazakhstan's point of view, it is also a relatively safe subject (there is wide agreement about the need to take measures with a view to stabilising the

situation in Afghanistan), and one which will permit Astana to pursue its own political interests and present its standpoint on an issue which may be distant for the West, but is nevertheless important. The history of Astana's co-operation with Kabul to date suggests that Kazakhstan's pledges to get involved in the efforts towards stabilisation in Afghanistan may realistically be put into practice.

Irrespective of its own plans, Kazakhstan will most probably also have to raise other issues of importance for Central Asia in the OSCE forum. Due to their complexity, they are unlikely to be solved; however, Kazakhstan's *ad hoc* actions as the OSCE chair may turn out helpful. Diplomatic interventions undertaken by Astana as the OSCE chair country may be significant in the event of heightened activity by terrorist groups permeating into Central Asia from Afghanistan. Astana may also be forced to get involved if regional tension rises as a result of the difficult economic situation, especially in areas with a complex ethnic structure such as the Fergana Valley, or as a consequence of migrant workers returning en masse (especially to Tajikistan), which may happen in connection with the crisis. It is also likely that Kazakhstan will try to use its position as OSCE leader to resolve the border disputes which have generated constant tension between the Central Asian states. Astana will probably take action to mitigate the tension caused by the recurrent conflicts over water resources between the water-rich Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the one hand, and on the other between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which depend on external water supplies.

Another important item on Kazakhstan's agenda will be to try to place more emphasis on issues of security and economic co-operation, in line with the CIS countries' expectations, as these have been the subject of discussions within the OSCE for many years.

While most of Kazakhstan's plans will probably not go beyond declarations (primarily because of the OSCE's decision-making procedures), discussions about projects concerning security

<sup>3</sup> The previous summit of the presidents of OSCE member states took place in 1999 in Istanbul.

<sup>4</sup> In November 2009, Kazakhstan signed an agreement under which US\$50 million would be allocated over the next five years to scholarships for one thousand Afghans who will study in universities in Kazakhstan. Previously, it allocated US\$2.4 million for the construction of a hospital and a school, and for the supplies of wheat to Afghanistan.

issues will probably gain momentum; for instance, as a gesture to Russia, Kazakhstan will raise the question of the Russian-proposed European Security Treaty (EST). This should not, however, be interpreted as unconditional support for the Russian initiative. Astana is aware that the draft proposed by the Russians is unacceptable to most OSCE members, and since the Russians want the project to be discussed above all, Kazakhstan will probably use its efforts to promote the EST as an element in wider Kazakh/Russian manoeuvres concerning the two countries' interests.

As the leader of the OSCE, Astana will have to take up the task of co-ordinating measures to resolve the frozen conflicts within the OSCE mandate area, specifically those in Georgia, Karabakh and Transnistria. Given the strategic importance of its relations with Russia, Kazakhstan is unlikely to become involved in the resolution of the Georgian issue. However, Astana should be expected to participate actively in the Azeri-Armenian negotiations, which have considerably accelerated in recent months.

Kazakhstan has also been emphasising the importance of economic problems in the OSCE area and calling for measures to facilitate economic co-operation. As the region's largest oil producer and exporter, the world's largest producer of uranium since 2009, and the country with an ambition to have a nuclear fuel bank located on its territory, Kazakhstan seems to be well placed to come up with such initiatives. However, Astana's declarations so far have been rather enigmatic (the Kazakh foreign minister has spoken about the need to take action to simplify the international movement of people, goods and services, and to support measures to promote

energy security), and are difficult to assess in terms of feasibility.

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expectations of both the CIS countries, which it considers itself to represent<sup>5</sup>, and the West, which opts for the promotion of democratic standards. The fatigue of the post-Soviet states with the OSCE's criticism of their political processes and ways of holding elections resulted, in 2007, in an attempt by Moscow to limit the role of the Office<sup>6</sup>. Eventually, however, Kazakhstan withdrew its support for the Russian initiative, and committed itself to supporting the activities of the ODIHR as the OSCE leader. The first test of the Office's activities under the Kazakh chairmanship will take place in January when the assessment of December's ballot in Uzbekistan will probably be published, followed by the assessment of the presidential election in Ukraine. The declarations of the Kazakh foreign minister concerning plans to extend the mandate of the OSCE special representative for elections, the vice-president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Kimmo Kiljunen, suggest that what is coming up is not so much a change in the operation of the ODIHR, as increased interest from the OSCE in social issues other than democratisation. Those include areas in which Kazakhstan has some achievements it wishes to promote, such as inter-ethnic and interfaith accord, combating racism and intolerance, as well as issues considered to be politically safe, such as equal rights for women, combating child trafficking and environmental issues.

Kazakhstan will try to co-ordinate the activities of the OSCE and the other organisations in which it actively participates. This may apply to co-operation with the CIS, led this year by Russia, as well as the other organisations chaired by Kazakhstan this year, namely the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference and the Eurasian Econo-

<sup>5</sup> The Kazakhs refer to themselves as a 'collective candidate' to chair the Organisation.

<sup>6</sup> The Russian proposal was initially backed by a majority of the CIS member states, including Kazakhstan. It envisaged limiting the size of observer missions to 50 persons and a ban on publishing ballot assessments before the official announcement of results, among other measures.

mic Community. The Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also announced that it will try to co-ordinate the actions addressing the threats caused by the instability in Afghanistan between the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation and NATO.

## Possible consequences of the Kazakh chairmanship of the OSCE

Irrespective of any tangible results, the chairmanship will strengthen Astana's international position. It will be an important experience without precedent in the region. It will facilitate the development of closer contacts and international co-operation in areas which Kazakhstan regards as important. The chairmanship may also enable Kazakhstan to build a profile as a state aspiring to make its mark on policy towards Afghanistan by promoting measures

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aimed at Afghan reconstruction in co-operation with Russia, the European Union and the United States.

The OSCE chairmanship will also demonstrate how independent Kazakhstan's policy really is. The high and often mutually contradictory expectations of the CIS countries, including Russia, and the broadly understood West, are indicative of the pressures that Astana will have to face.

The Kazakh chairmanship may become a trial of strength between Moscow and Astana, the outcome of which will influence the future development of bilateral relations between the two countries.

Internally, the Kazakh leadership will use the OSCE chairmanship to enhance the image of the authorities. The chairmanship will serve as evidence of their efficacy and international recognition, while at the same time making them immune to criticism from the West.

Astana has a chance of permanently stepping up the OSCE's involvement in the region. The projects Kazakhstan initiates will continue in the following years, and – although they will not produce spectacular results in the short term – they may have a positive impact on the region, and the OSCE's involvement in solving the everyday problems faced by people in the CIS may help enhance the Organisation's image in the region.

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