

## **In the Middle of Nowhere – The OSCE’s Astana Summit**

*by Ulrich Kühn*

The OSCE’s first Summit since eleven years ends with a bitter taste of *realpolitical* disillusionment. Frankly speaking, none of the pressing issues on the Organization’s agenda was successfully dealt with. Neither on sub-regional conflicts, arms control, Afghanistan, nor on the establishment of an opaque “security community” progress has been made. The only success was the holding of a Summit *per se* – for the first time in a post-Soviet Central Asian country – and the consensual adoption of the Astana Commemorative Declaration containing a strong confirmation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Whether this will be enough to successfully guide the Organization through the upcoming years is questionable.

Probably none of the officials of participating States had extensively high hopes about the upcoming Summit in the Kazakh steppe. However, the attendance of at least 38 Heads of State and Government, one Vice President, seven Deputy Prime Ministers, and 14 Ministers allowed for a feeling of importance which the Organization was lacking since 1999 already. In this connection the early decision of US President Barack Obama not to join the Summit was not only a clear sign of the declining importance the White House attaches to the OSCE but also a strategic mistake since the US needs a reliable network of partners in Central Asia with a view to its engagement in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Obama’s decision could be labelled foresightful since the Summit only confirmed the historically rooted ditches between several States. This becomes the more important as an organization, such as the OSCE, is dependent on consensual decisions.

Therefore, the move by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to burden the Summit with an opening statement about the “totally unacceptable” use of military force by the Georgian leadership in South Ossetia in August 2008 was symptomatic for the Summit and for the Organization as a whole. The following turf wars between Georgia, backed by the US, and its counterpart Russia or between Armenia and Azerbaijan only revealed how conspicuous deeply rooted antagonistic perceptions in some parts of the OSCE area hinder progress on the Organization’s agenda. Though, this is not the only lesson from Astana. Another insightful detail comes from the Astana Declaration, subtitled “Towards a Security Community”. It becomes obvious that the OSCE cannot or will not offer Russia a unique forum for realizing President Medvedev’s proposal for a remodelling of European security structures set forth in his 2009 draft security treaty. This is on the one hand factually correct since Medvedev’s plans lack political feasibility, yet, it is from a political point of view short-sighted to console Moscow with an opaque “Security Community” along the lines of the 1990s procedural “security model exercise”. The more the Russian side discards the OSCE’s ability to exist as an institutional provider of ‘hard security’ the less it will be willing to agree to strengthening the Organization’s first dimension which is already the focal point of Russian critique.

It comes, and this has to be acknowledged, therefore as a positive surprise when the Astana Declaration stresses “the inherent dignity of the individual [as] the core of comprehensive security”. Even stronger, States “reaffirm categorically and irrevocably that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.” This is not only a strong wording but a clear reinforcement of the OSCE’s 1991 established Moscow Mechanism. Beyond that the four-page Astana Declaration amounts to little more than a reconfirmation of known OSCE norms and principles. At the same time, 20 years after the signing of the Charter of Paris restating these principles is already a success, keeping in mind how drastically the political landscape has changed, especially in the area of the former Soviet Union. What is a clear failure of the Astana Summit and the late night

agreed upon declaration is the adjournment of some of the most pressing issues on the OSCE's agenda. In the realm of politico-military security States envision the updating of the Vienna Document 1999 without designating a concrete timeline. The same applies to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) where the ongoing consultations shall aim at "opening the way for negotiations in 2011." Postponing concrete action seems to be a characteristic of the Astana Declaration, thus the incoming Lithuanian Chairman-in-Office was tasked with "organizing a follow-up process within existing formats [...] developing a concrete action plan" in the next year. It is this action plan which the Astana Summit failed to agree upon. Whether the "follow-up process" is meant as a kind of 'Corfu Plus' or what kind of "concrete action" is envisioned was being left open to interpretation.

Especially the OSCE's approach to conflict resolution was further weakened by the Astana Summit. The list of urgent matters in this sphere spans from Moldova to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, to Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. Although the German, French, and Russian Heads of State and Government in the run-up to Astana had expressed their hopes to move forward on the issue of Transnistria, the Russian-Georgian antagonism seemed to have clouded almost all efforts in this realm. Hence, no agreement has been reached on Transnistria, neither on Nagorno-Karabakh with the Minsk Process having come to a standstill, nor on a possible re-deployment of an OSCE field mission to Georgia. The OSCE's previous failure to react to the crisis in Kyrgyzstan was only underlined by the failure of the Summit to address the issue. On Afghanistan the declaration underscores "the need to contribute effectively [...] to collective efforts" to stabilize the country. This declaration of intent was probably not what Washington had hoped for. In this connection one could question American policy at Astana. It seems that the US were too reluctant to enclose the conflict-ridden states of the South Caucasus with a view to possible future critique from Capitol Hill. Though, it is not clear what concrete action by the Obama administration would not trigger critique from the Conservative aisle these days.

Although the declaration concedes that "the time has now come to act", Astana was rather not the time and place to act. No negotiations on the Vienna Document 1999 or CFE were being mandated, no renewed efforts to resolve protracted conflicts are visible, no possible training program for border guards on the Tajik-Afghan border was put in place. True, the holding of the Summit plus having reached agreement on adopting a declaration marks a success of its own. This should not be underestimated. Also on the credit side is a strong declaratory commitment on strengthening the human dimension. Especially German Chancellor Angela Merkel's input has to be acknowledged in this connection. Yet, whether this will be enough for the Organization's long-term survival is questionable. Also uncertain remains the ability of the incoming Chairman-in-Office to elaborate the urgently needed action plan. Trapped between a bygone decade of stalemate and an uncertain future the OSCE seems to be a bit lost in the middle of nowhere.

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Ulrich Kühn

Kontakt: [kuehn@ifsh.de](mailto:kuehn@ifsh.de)