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The OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Overview

The OSCE Academy in Bishkek was called into life at the end of 2002 on the initiative of the Kyrgyz government with support from the OSCE under its outgoing Portuguese Chairmanship. The key factor behind the positive reaction on the part of several participating States to the project proposal was its regional orientation. The idea of establishing a think-tank in and for the region, dedicated to OSCE-specific topics and OSCE principles, and with the intention of introducing future experts and decision makers to these topics and principles as part of their education was and remains unique, not only in Central Asia. At the same time, the intention was to create a research and teaching institute specializing in Central Asian security issues and acting as a service provider for the OSCE.

Since the Academy's festive opening on 17 December 2002, the concept has been able to take shape and find expression in concrete activities.

During 2003, a number of fundamental decisions have been passed and several administrative bodies established. These are vital preconditions to ensuring the Academy's start-up phase is followed by practical success.¹

The Academy's Board of Trustees, which met in Vienna in October and December of 2003, made decisions on fundamental budgetary questions, the pilot programme for the planned master's degree course, and the appointment of the Core Management Team. At the same time, general agreement was reached on the form the Academy should take. The call for applications was put out for the pilot semester in "Political Science (Central Asia)", which took place in summer 2004, and the process of selecting candidates began. In December 2003, a committee with members from Central Asia and Western Europe chose 25 participants from the 318 applicants using criteria drawn up by the Board of Trustees. The selection procedure was notable for its transparency and stringent adherence to the rules.

Also in preparation from the end of 2003, another vital step in securing the Academy's future was completed in time for the start of the pilot summer semester: the move from rooms in Kyrgyzstan's Diplomatic Academy to generous premises provided by the Kyrgyz government. The two-storey building, complete with a garden and a canteen, provides the ideal setting for a modern campus. Following renovation and the installation of computers

¹ On the creation of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, see: Frank Evers, A New Think-Tank for the OSCE and Central Asia: Establishing the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2003*, Baden-Baden 2004, pp. 337-345.

and DSL internet access, the building was ready for employees, students and visiting academics to move in by the start of February 2004.

Nevertheless, the preparation and teaching of the summer course mentioned above (from 2 February to 5 June 2004) was only one – if the most visible – aspect of the work of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek in the first half of 2004.

Because the decision to found and support the Academy was largely the result of political will, it commenced its work without a clear conception of what its concrete activities would be. A preliminary working plan created in the first half of 2003 defined three basic fields of activity: professional training, postgraduate education, and research. At this point, there was still no budget for the medium term. Up to the end of 2003, a key priority was the question of the Academy's financial future, which was at first only secured until mid-2004. Against this background, preparing a detailed proposal for the Academy's operations and its finances became a matter of considerable urgency. The budget proposal was prepared during the first three months of 2004 and, after approval by the Board of Trustees, was circulated and formally presented to representatives of the delegations in Vienna on 27 April 2004. Intensive fundraising based on sound conceptual and financial planning and the necessity of winning international trust through its existing activities was and remains a key task for the OSCE Academy and its regional and international partners. The budget proposal stipulates that the Academy should achieve long-term sustainability by 2006, the end of the extended pilot phase. There is also the related question of the Academy's future legal status. In line with a number of legal opinions commissioned by the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, negotiations with the Kyrgyz government led to the signing on 22 July 2004 of an agreement giving the Academy the status of a public foundation under Kyrgyz law. The Academy thus ceased to be an OSCE project and became an independent entity. The agreement is valid for two years and may be prolonged on mutual agreement.

Activities in the Academy's Three Areas of Operation

Professional Training

From the beginning, the central areas of the Academy's work were defined as professional training, postgraduate education, and research.² In its inaugural year, the Academy concentrated on the first of these areas, running two training courses. The first, a Summer School on conflict prevention, was organized by the Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution (ASPR) and held from 6 to 12 July 2003 with participants from four states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). A second course, on

2 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 342.

“International and Regional Security Policy”, was held from 29 September to 3 October 2003 in collaboration with the Geneva Centre for Security Policy and attracted participants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Both courses were attended by a mixture of public-sector experts and NGO representatives. This group, consisting mainly of young professionals, will be the Academy’s main focus in the future – and not only in the area of professional development in a narrow sense. At the same time, established senior officials who were trained in Soviet times will not be excluded from these kinds of skills development activities, something that takes into account the needs of a number of OSCE participating States.

According to the operational plan of the Academy developed in 2004, professional training should make up the bulk of its activities in the medium and long term. For the immediate future, it is planned to hold further courses similar to those organized in 2003 and related to the Academy’s core area of security policy. The establishment of the Academy as a unique regional training centre matches the needs of the states in and around an area whose problems and security risks do not respect national borders. The regional framework for discussion established by the Academy creates added value above and beyond its role as a provider of training services. The Academy has already begun to gain experience and develop organizational skills in recruiting participants from within the region and co-operating with regional and extra-regional partners. As this experience and these capacities grow, they will be made available to the OSCE, the OSCE Centres on the ground, and other interested partner organizations.

Nonetheless, both the management and staff of the Academy and their European partners are aware that the vision of a regional training centre is about more than just organizational competence and logistic support. Far more important is the joint regional and international effort to adapt existing generic models of professional training and development to the regional context and to develop new, tailor-made programmes. In this spirit, the Academy’s budget proposal already makes provision for follow-up activities to build on training courses. This coincides with the partner institutions’ interest in enhancing their capacities in the region. In October 2004, the Academy offered training courses run in co-operation with the ASPR. It is also planned to offer courses run jointly with other partners.

Postgraduate Education

The first complete one-year postgraduate course “Master of Political Science (Central Asia)” commenced in September 2004. The programme is open to interested university graduates, young professionals, and teachers from the region, OSCE participating States, and other countries. The aim of the degree is to provide professionals with education and training in security-related matters and OSCE principles within a framework shaped by the concept of

comprehensive security. This postgraduate degree course thus not only provides a specialized form of professional training but will also lead to the production of experts in regional affairs for the areas of research and teaching, politics and international relations. The award of this master's degree – currently accredited by the Kyrgyz authorities and due to be granted international recognition in the medium term – will not only enhance participants' knowledge but will also provide them with a title that should smooth the path of professional advancement.

The course is aligned with both international standards and regional interests. Based on several existing European master's courses, the curriculum was developed in 2003 by regional experts and European partners, especially the Centre for OSCE Research (CORE) at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH). The curriculum is unique in its regional specificity, but still adheres to the standards of comparable internationally accredited degree courses. The modular nature of the curriculum of the Master of Political Science (Central Asia) degree makes it easier to attract highly qualified experts from the region and further afield to teach specific units. The course begins with an intensive teaching semester (consisting of nine separate modules), which is followed by a month-long internship, a colloquium, the writing of the master's thesis, and state examinations/thesis defence. The programme is unique for a number of reasons:³

- Its regional approach: The curriculum was developed jointly with experts and academics from Central Asia and Europe, rather than being imported wholesale. It aims to impart both general theoretical knowledge and regionally specific content. The current student body and teaching staff consists of individuals from four countries in the region.
- Its practical focus: In workshops, which form a central element of the curriculum, practitioners from the region introduce the activities of government institutions and international and non-governmental organizations. Teaching in the workshops is particularly oriented towards interactive methods and includes the use of simulations of relevant situations. Other practice-based elements of the curriculum include training in conflict management and a month-long internship taken at the start of the second semester. The experiences gathered during the internships, which are performed at international organizations (mostly in Central Asia but also occasionally in Europe), are discussed at the subsequent colloquium and written up in the master's thesis.
- Its embeddedness in the work of the Academy as a whole: The Academy's postgraduate course is closely interlinked with its other two main areas of activity. The participants' master's theses should be seen as an opportunity for them to establish themselves as the experts of the future and to forge durable links to the Academy's network of academics and

3 According to the budget proposal of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, April 2004.

practitioners. Up-and-coming talents will have the opportunity of integration in the Academy's future education and research activities. Finally, the Academy's alumni work will come to play an important role.

The Master of Political Science (Central Asia) has been recognized not only by the Kyrgyz foreign ministry, but also by its opposite numbers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In the future, the academy aims to achieve international accreditation within the Bologna Process. The necessary steps are being set in motion during the 2004/5 academic year.

Summer Course "Political Science (Central Asia)", 2 February to 5 June 2004

The programme for the 2004 pilot semester was identical with the first semester of the actual master's degree course and was carried out using the study regulations governing the master's degree as adopted by the Academy's Board of Trustees. The summer course was thus a crucial test for the postgraduate programme as a whole. Not only the individual teaching components were evaluated, but also the coherence of the lectures, seminars, and workshops within each module and the balance of the modules within the semester as a whole. Evaluation questionnaires and special meetings ensured intensive student involvement in the debate on the programme. This has resulted in considerable improvements to the curriculum on which the actual master's course that commenced in September was based.

During the summer course, the mechanisms for selecting students were also successfully tested. Once more, an international committee selected 25 candidates from over 300 applicants using agreed criteria. Quotas were used to distribute places on the course, with five students selected from each of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. As there were no applications from Turkmenistan, the results of the selection procedure were used to fill the remaining five places: Three additional students were selected from Kyrgyzstan (making eight in total), and one each from Italy and the United Kingdom. The fact that applications were received from outside the region demonstrates the course's international attractiveness. The Academy itself benefits considerably from international participation: This meant that the students dealt more intensively with a variety of teaching and learning methods, and, most importantly, benefited from the challenges involved in daily contact with people from other cultures and the process of discovering what they have in common.

Besides participating in seminars and lectures offered within the core curriculum, summer course attendees also had the opportunity to participate in discussions with visiting politicians and diplomats. These meetings were not only interesting for the students, but also for the visitors, who encountered an informed and critical audience. The positive comments of these guests have reinforced the hopes invested in the Academy and support the

view that this young institution will one day be able to produce leaders in the worlds of research and practice. There has been a high level of interest among summer-course participants to continue their studies towards the degree of Master of Political Science (Central Asia) by enrolling in the second semester of the master's course proper, due to begin in February 2005. This confirms the view that the Academy has achieved a major success with its first significant project.

Research

While the Central Asian academic landscape has become much more lively in recent years, it remains underdeveloped compared to other regions. However, expert analysis is needed to accurately identify both opportunities for development and potential conflicts in the region and to turn them into practical strategies for conflict prevention and conflict management. Two factors indicate an important role that the Academy could play: First, Research projects developed outside the area are often based on inadequate regional knowledge – as suggested above with regard to professional training – and, second, research competencies within Central Asia are often heavily focused on descriptive analysis at the expense of theory. This suggests that the Academy could do well to use its existing network of regional and international partners to develop innovative regional research projects with a direct or indirect practical application. There are two basic forms this could take: undertaking fundamental research into OSCE-relevant topics aimed at generating practical recommendations for security and development policy (and ensuring that the results of the research are not determined in advance by the framing of the questions) and researching specific topics or questions on demand (which could include project evaluation).

Although this area of its work is still being built up, the Academy certainly offers considerable scope for strengthening practice-oriented research on Central Asia. It is hoped that the first year's crop of around 35 master's theses, due in 2005, will already make a significant contribution to this area, bringing the Academy closer to its goal of establishing itself as a fully fledged think-tank. Projects planned for 2004-5 include one on "Rule of Law and Local Traditions" and a project on local conflict-resolution strategies (to be carried out jointly with CORE). Both projects will involve co-operation with regional partners from at least two states.

Outlook

Since summer 2003, the OSCE Academy in Bishkek has lived up to the hopes invested in it by carrying out highly successful activities in the areas of professional training and postgraduate education, and by improving the con-

cept of the academy. The Core Management Team appointed by the Board of Trustees has moved to build up its own capabilities, thus increasing its independence from the OSCE Centre in Bishkek. The number of states that have promised material support for the Academy has risen: Alongside Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, by June 2004, Finland, Denmark, Slovenia, and Turkey had also pledged financial support. France will once again pay the salaries of teaching staff for the master's degree course. The Kyrgyz leadership will continue to support the Academy by providing the necessary infrastructure. Even more important, however, is the willingness of the Academy's initiators to support its attempt to achieve institutional independence. With national elections due in 2005, the Kyrgyz leadership is currently making its support very public, and the visit by President Askar Akaev to the Academy, where he reiterated his country's commitment to support it in its goal of becoming a regional centre of excellence and a think-tank for Central Asia can be seen as a sign that further positive developments may be expected. However, to achieve this, the Academy will require a greater involvement and commitment on the part of Kyrgyzstan's neighbours. Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are already represented on the Board of Trustees and the Academy's selection committee, and Kazakhstan's involvement is likely to increase, given that country's rapidly growing need for regional expertise. Uzbekistan has so far been less enthusiastic, but Uzbek academics and other experts have already been involved in the planning of the academy via their participation in the informal Advisory Council of regional and international partners. Turkmenistan should be integrated in selected practical activities where possible. In this connection, the Academy has an extremely important potential to become a "virtual centre" that need not restrict its activities and discussions to events and projects in Kyrgyzstan, despite having its physical headquarters in Bishkek. The regional partners will show their growing commitment to the Academy, to the extent that they become increasingly involved as both active supporters and users. These – partly also political – considerations on how all the Central Asian states can be more closely integrated into the Academy project highlight challenges whose difficulty should not be underestimated, and which the Academy will have to face in the coming months. Considering both what has already been achieved and the precisely defined medium- and long-term goals for the Academy's development, it is clear that significant medium- and long-term commitment on the part of all OSCE participating States is required. A strong Academy is not only in the interest of the Central Asian states themselves: Security in Central Asia is of more than local interest and can only be established on the basis of competent analysis and expertise, carried out in tandem with reliable partners. The OSCE Academy in Bishkek needs to prove that it is itself a successful regional co-operation project just as it needs to contribute to co-operation in education, training, and research.