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The Astana Summit Has Left the OSCE in a State of Limbo

There have been many assessments, and there will be more, offering different views on whether the OSCE Summit Meeting in Astana on 1 and 2 December was a failure, and if so, why. Let us proceed from the simple fact that even modest expectations concerning the outcome of a quickly prepared meeting of Heads of State or Government – a framework for action, or an action plan focusing the OSCEs work and negotiations on several issues, thus charting its way into the immediate future – were disappointed by the inability of the participating States to overcome a small number of disagreements over the language of the framework document. Thus the Summit Meeting, closing almost half a day later than initially anticipated, ended by approving a political declaration that merely reconfirmed previous CSCE/OSCE commitments and expressed hope for progress in a few areas on which agreement was available. It thus ended without any substantial decisions.

Of course, it was not the fault of the Meeting's host, Kazakhstan, which chaired the Organization in 2010. Although controversial, particularly with respect to its position on the human dimension, the Kazakhstani Chairmanship was a success overall. This probably surprised many who were initially sceptical. However, the success or failure of any international organization, and particularly of one such as the consensus-based OSCE, depends on all its participating States, on whether or not they are mature enough to be able to articulate their common purpose despite disagreeing on particular issues.

Instead of reviewing the proceedings of the OSCE Summit in Astana, this short article concentrates on the potential consequences of the Summit for the future of the OSCE and, more generally, for the wider European security dialogue, and on a few lessons that can be learned from the outcome of the Summit.

1. The first and most immediate consequence of the failure of the Heads of State or Government of the OSCE participating States at their meeting in Astana to agree on what the focus of the Organization's work should be, or to adopt any substantive decision, is that *holding another OSCE Summit Meeting in the near future has become highly unlikely*. The existing divisions need to be overcome before the way will be clear for another Summit.

I believe I am not entirely wrong in assuming that this conclusion is valid not only for the OSCE, but also for any other Europe-wide configuration. In other words, *the failure of the Astana Summit to come to substantive decisions has not only made another OSCE Summit Meeting, but any other pan-European summit meeting, highly unlikely*.

2. The discord among the participating States that manifested itself in Astana was not created at the Summit itself or even during Kazakhstan's Chairmanship. Rather, it has accumulated over a longer period of time. For over a decade now, OSCE Ministerial Meetings have regularly failed to agree on the language of a political declaration. The stumbling block was frequently the same set of issues over which the Heads of State or Government failed in Astana.

This should lead to the conclusion that there are important structural problems within the Organization that have prevented it from achieving consensus on many issues.

It is my understanding that the main problem boils down to the fact that the participating States have long been deeply divided on the issue of *what is, or what should be, the rationale and the common purpose of the OSCE*. The attempt by a Panel of Eminent Persons in 2005 to restore the consensus on the Organization's common purpose was a valuable contribution, but it fell short of achieving its goal, as did many further attempts thereafter.

The deep division of the participating States over this issue was clearly manifested in 2010 during the Corfu Process, which was actually designed to narrow the gap, rather than make it explicit.

Going through non-papers and food-for-thought papers circulated by participating States during the first six months of 2010, one can identify a very regrettable pattern: Virtually none of the proposals submitted by one or more CSTO states – and they have produced a total of 22 – were co-sponsored by any other participating State. The single notable exception is a proposal co-sponsored by Serbia.

Numerous proposals tabled during the Corfu Process by EU member states, North American states, and others were co-sponsored by a variety of participating States, including Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Indeed, many proposals were supported by an impressive majority of participating States. However, not one of them was co-sponsored by any of the CSTO countries.

This reveals a sobering fact that we need to address properly: *A deep dividing line runs through the OSCE*. When we talk about old or new dividing lines that may occur because of this or that decision, we need to keep in mind that *this dividing line already exists*, and it clearly manifested itself during the Corfu Process and at the Summit Meeting in Astana.

By comparing proposals made by states on one side of the dividing line with those made on the other in terms of content we can get a better grasp of the depth and breadth of this division and understand why there is so little cross-group support for proposals put forward by any group. At root, the two distinct sets of proposals reflect fundamentally diverging views of the OSCE at present, and of the way it should move forward. These divergences very much reveal the core of the problem, namely the *lack of a common understanding of the OSCE's common purpose*.

3. If I were to compare the current situation with any moment in the long history of the CSCE/OSCE, I would say that, at the time of the Astana Summit, the OSCE found itself in a situation somewhat similar to that of the CSCE in 1977 and 1978 at its first Follow-up Meeting in Belgrade.

This is not meant as a comparison of the environment, the substantial issues, or the agenda the Belgrade Follow-up Meeting and the Astana Summit dealt with, although it is notable that the Belgrade Meeting largely failed due to differences in official positions on the importance of the human dimension of the CSCE, which apparently again played a significant role in the talks during preparation for the Astana Summit. Of course, both the environment and the current agenda have changed dramatically since the late 1970s.

The similarity between the Belgrade Follow-up Meeting and the Astana Summit however, goes far beyond the simple facts that both failed to adopt a substantive document and reduced themselves to reconfirming previous commitments. After Astana, and like the CSCE after Belgrade, the OSCE finds itself in a state of limbo from which its level of activity may go up or down. It is up to the participating States to define the direction it moves in. After Belgrade, they decided not only to continue the Helsinki Process, but also to take it a step further, which they did in Madrid in 1983. Where the participating States want the OSCE to go from now is an open question at present, and it is equally unclear whether they are all ready to work hard in order to prevent it from simply sinking out of sight.

4. Of course, nothing should prevent the OSCE from moving ahead in tackling the many issues on which consensus was available in Astana and is available in Vienna, or which were subject to substantive yet inconclusive debates during the Corfu Process.

Indeed, the Astana Commemorative Declaration calls upon the participating States to advance in a number of areas, particularly on conventional arms control in Europe and updating the 1999 Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures, with conflict prevention and crisis management also remaining high on the OSCE agenda. The Framework for Action that was almost ready before the Summit Meeting did not formally die, but was handed over to the incoming Chairmanship of Lithuania.

Still, one needs to be prepared for the fact that the same underlying disagreement that prevented the Summit in Astana from agreeing on the Framework for Action will continuously flare up in the time to come, and will likely prevent the OSCE – as well as other negotiations conducted outside the OSCE – from reaching substantive decisions. This is being revealed in the unfolding debate in Vienna over whether the OSCE should unravel the Framework for Action and push forward on the issues upon which agreement is available, or whether it should keep working on the Framework as a whole in order to guarantee that every country that was not particularly happy with

the draft framework has its interest appropriately reflected on the agenda of the Organization.

The issues preventing progress exist independently of the Organization, and are thus likely to impact negotiations between participating States in different settings, and not only within the OSCE itself. This brings me to the conclusion that the failure of the Summit in Astana is likely to have much broader consequences, reaching well beyond the OSCE, unless we start to sincerely address the divisions between the OSCE participating States and come to a consensus on what the common purpose of the OSCE is or should be.

5. One aspect of the job to be done is to address one very specific issue: The OSCE has repeatedly failed as a result of divergent positions on how to deal with protracted conflicts. The question is whether the OSCE should continue to struggle to solve these most intransigent conflicts that it has repeatedly failed to solve, or should now leave them for others to deal with.

For centuries, great powers have tended to talk to each other and, in doing so, have made mutual arrangements over the heads of small nations. This has often been done at the expense of the latter, or at the price of ignoring or neglecting their interests. It applies no less to a large part of the CSCE's early history.

But is it still possible for great powers to behave like this? And can they afford it?

It is, of course, not right for the entire Organization to be held hostage by protracted conflicts that many participating States consider to be peripheral issues.

At the same time, it would be totally wrong to ignore or neglect the problems of the small nations, let alone for great powers to seek to make arrangements over the heads of them or at their expense, either within or outside the OSCE framework.

Any participating State, large or small, is not simply a part of the OSCE family. A strong feeling of ownership is an important prerequisite for any success on the part of the OSCE, while a lack thereof makes failure more likely. Further erosion of the feeling of ownership among the participating States, and particularly among the small ones – as has significantly happened over the past decade – would be a recipe for increasing impotence and an ultimate collapse of the OSCE, as it would deprive the Organization of its legitimacy as an honest broker. Should small nations no longer see the OSCE as an institution in which their concerns are heard and acted upon, as promised by the 1994 Budapest Summit Meeting, then the Organization would degenerate much faster than because of any disputes among great powers.

Finding a balance of interests among *all* participating states, large and small, is an indispensable task, without which a consensus of *all* OSCE participating states over their *common purpose* can hardly be found or restored.