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## The OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan

When Uzbekistan obtained independence in 1991, the country had an opportunity to shape its own future, and committed itself to building a state and a society that adhered to OSCE principles. Ever since then, the OSCE's field presence in Uzbekistan has been assisting the government in this endeavour.

Much has changed since the OSCE opened its Liaison Office in Central Asia in Tashkent in 1995. That office later became an OSCE Centre, which in turn was succeeded by the Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan (PCUz). It is the intention of this contribution to consider the circumstances of the PCUz, examine its mandate and recent achievements, and set out the prospects for future co-operation.

### *The Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan: Mandate and Activities*

On 16 March 1995, by virtue of Permanent Council Decision No. 28, the OSCE established its first field presence in Central Asia in Tashkent. Five years later, after other Central Asian states had gradually welcomed their own field missions, the Liaison Office in Central Asia became the OSCE Centre in Tashkent, with a mandate to "promote the implementation of OSCE principles and commitments" and to "perform tasks deemed appropriate by the Chairman-in-Office or other OSCE institutions and agreed on between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the OSCE".<sup>1</sup>

In 2006, that mandate was revised significantly by Permanent Council Decision No. 734, which led to the establishment of a new kind of field presence for the OSCE: the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan. The new operation was designed to conduct activities agreed upon with the government of Uzbekistan with a view to assisting the latter in implementing OSCE principles and commitments, ensuring security and stability, and supporting the efforts of the government of Uzbekistan with regard to further socio-economic development and environmental protection.<sup>2</sup>

The PCUz's project-based activities are developed together with local stakeholders and agreed on by the government on an annual basis. Any ex-

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Note: The views contained in this contribution are the author's own.

1 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Permanent Council, Decision No. 397, OSCE Centre in Tashkent*, PC.DEC/397, 14 December 2000, p. 1, 2, at: <http://www.osce.org/pc/12636>.

2 Cf. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Permanent Council, Decision No. 734, OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Uzbekistan*, PC.DEC/734, 30 June 2006, at: <http://www.osce.org/pc/19717>.

tension of project activities beyond the initially agreed period requires a new agreement.

Project beneficiaries and other national stakeholders are systematically involved in all steps of the project's genesis and implementation, leading to a greater sense of ownership by national partners. This form of co-operation ensures that there is political will to tackle the issues at hand, which allows the PCUz to better leverage its staff's time and financial resources and positively affects capacity-building efforts. Below, we present several projects, covering all three dimensions of the OSCE, to show how the process works in practice and what a difference these projects make to enhancing security and stability.

### *Politico-Military Activities*

#### *Support for Civil Society Organizations*

An active, independent, and diverse civil society contributing to national advancement by complementing state policies and exercising public oversight is essential to a democratic system based on the rule of law. Conscious of this need, Uzbekistan initiated a reform process in 2010 under the slogan "from a strong state to a strong civil society" that was designed to boost civil society development by providing civil society organizations with financial support and legal guarantees that would enable them to fully play their role.

Working closely with the Independent Institute for Monitoring of the Formation of Civil Society (NIMFOGO/IIMFCS), the PCUz has worked to enable civil society, including the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to exercise their function of oversight by enhancing their professional skills, legal literacy, and political culture.

The PCUz has organized training events and seminars throughout the country. These bring together representatives of civil society organizations from a range of backgrounds, using innovative approaches to transmit knowledge and skills. The events have enhanced participants' awareness of national legislation while enabling them to create and manage their own projects – from drafting to completion. The PCUz has also provided technical support, including distribution of OSCE publications on human rights, elections, gender issues, community policing, and human trafficking, and the provision of computers to the NIMFOGO Training Centre for NGOs and other civil society institutions.

The PCUz's support for civil society is envisioned as a cross-dimensional endeavour that involves civil society organizations in finding comprehensive solutions to specific issues. Organizations such as the Uzbek Farmers' Council, the Business Women's Association of Uzbekistan, the NGO *Istiqbolli Avlod* (Future Generation), which provides assistance to vic-

tims of human trafficking, and others have been enabled to contribute to the government's efforts and the reform process. This, in turn, improved their operational capacity and allowed them to showcase the essential role civil society can play in tackling various issues.

### *Biometric Passports*

Unreliable travel documents have long been a risk factor for trans-boundary crime and a threat to the safety of international civil air navigation. In recent years, many countries have been moving towards the use of biometric passports, which carry an electronic chip containing the biometric data of the holder. These new documents offer greater protection against counterfeiting and allow for faster and more accurate identification at border crossings.

In 2009, Uzbekistan started its transition towards the use of biometric passports. In Uzbekistan, passports serve as both travel and identity documents. This meant issuing every adult citizen in a country of 30 million with a new passport, and doing so in a timely manner so as to ensure a smooth transition.

Having collaborated with the authorities on travel document security since 2003, and enjoying good co-operation with law enforcement agencies, the PCUz was in prime position to assist. It was able to facilitate consultations between all stakeholders as well as the exchange of international best practices.

The PCUz organized a workshop to acquaint decision-makers with the steps to set up the new system. It also facilitated a visit of experts from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to make an initial assessment of the existing local infrastructure and sent delegations of Uzbek decision-makers and technical experts on study tours to observe best practices in the US and the UK. In 2011, the authorities decided to proceed with full-scale transition and established 215 points of collection for biometric data and passport application. The PCUz contributed in kind by supplying 32 sets of computers, printers, fax machines, and diesel generators for collection points located in remote areas. 250,000 biometric passports had been issued as of early 2014.

In addition, to ensure that Uzbekistan gets the most out of the system, the PCUz also encouraged it to participate in the Public Key Directory (PKD), an ICAO database that centralizes data on the validity of biometric passports issued by the participating states. Two study visits to the ICAO headquarters in Montreal and the offices of Netrust, a Singaporean company contracted to manage the PKD, were organized. As a result, in 2014 Uzbekistan became the 43rd state to participate in the PKD.

*Economic and Environmental Activities*

*Combating Money Laundering and the Financing of Terrorism*

According to international estimates, between 800 billion and two trillion US dollars' worth of criminal proceeds are laundered in the world every year. Money laundering is what lets criminals profit from their misdeeds. It represents a tremendous fiscal loss for states, and can facilitate the perpetration of acts of terrorism. Acknowledging the significant negative impact money laundering can have on states, the government of Uzbekistan outlawed money laundering and the financing of terrorism (ML/FT) in 2011, and has since gradually taken measures to tackle this threat.

ML/FT is transnational in nature, as launderers often exploit systemic vulnerabilities in an interconnected world to carry out their activities unnoticed. For this reason, international co-operation is essential to the fight against ML/FT, and the OSCE, which strives to encourage co-operation among its participating States, has a natural role to play in assisting Uzbekistan to achieve meaningful co-operation with the body at the forefront of these international efforts: the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

An independent inter-governmental body created in 1989 with a mandate to fight money laundering, the FATF has developed the "40+9 Recommendations", which are considered global standards in the fight against ML/FT. In order to facilitate co-operation between the government of Uzbekistan and the FATF, the PCUz has supported the participation of several Uzbek delegations in FATF meetings. It has also hosted seminars to discuss the latest amendments in the FATF recommendations, and capacity-building events in which compliance officers from banks and representatives from Designated Non-financial Businesses and Professions (DNFBP) and non-banking financial institutions were informed of the latest amendments and their practical implications.

Over the years, National Risk Assessment (NRA) has become the standard method in the fight against ML/FT. This method consists in assessing the likelihood and potential impact of all risks of ML/FT in a given country, so as to best decide how to combat ML/FT in a manner that is both cost-effective and tailored to the country's specific needs.

The government of Uzbekistan has recently decided to conduct its own NRA, and the PCUz has provided expert advice to assist the authorities in drafting the necessary methodology. With the support of the PCUz, a road-map was produced detailing the various stages of the NRA process, the expected input of all relevant stakeholders, and the country's capacity-building needs for effective implementation. In order to involve the private sector in the process, the PCUz also facilitated a dialogue – moderated by international experts – in which representatives from the Uzbek financial sector and relevant non-financial sectors had an opportunity to become acquainted with the

NRA and better understand their role in this process. Finally, the PCUz has supported the Uzbek Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) in becoming a member of the Egmont Group of Financial Intelligence Units in July 2011. The latter was formed in 1995 in the Egmont Arenberg Palace in Brussels with the aim of stimulating international co-operation in the fight against ML/FT, and this informal network now counts 132 members.

#### *Supporting the Economic Empowerment of Women*

Men and women are equal under Uzbek law, and discrimination based on gender is strictly prohibited, yet there remain too few women entrepreneurs. This has been attributed to a lack of business education, cultural factors, self-censorship, and the fact that female employment tends to be concentrated in non-commercial sectors, such as education and healthcare.

Together with the Business Women's Association of Uzbekistan, which strives to increase women's participation in the private sector, and the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan, the PCUz has worked to foster the development of women's business, professional, and networking skills by hosting training seminars throughout the country.

During these events, women entrepreneurs and female college graduates were able to develop their professional and business skills. The events also served as a welcome reminder to the participants that they are not alone, and provided an opportunity for them to build or strengthen their professional networks by meeting other entrepreneurs and local officials. The PCUz also supported the initiatives of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) to promote women's economic empowerment in Central Asia and to foster the development of regional professional networks.

In 2015, the PCUz will look to shift its focus onto assisting one of the most vulnerable demographic groups in the country, unemployed women living in rural areas, to develop their professional skills. Training seminars will be organized in each region of the country, where the attendees will receive instruction in skills for which local demand is highest as well as in starting their own local businesses.

## *Human Dimension Activities*

### *Supporting the Ombudsperson Institution*

Uzbekistan has committed itself to facilitating the emergence of “independent national institutions in the area of human rights and the rule of law”.<sup>3</sup> Of these, the Ombudsperson Institution deserves special attention, as its role is to receive petitions from citizens, investigate human rights violations, and identify their pattern. This is essential to address existing practices and highlight gaps in legislation that might hamper the protection of human rights.

The Ombudsperson is the “Authorised Person of the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Human Rights”<sup>4</sup> and exercises parliamentary oversight of state agencies and officials as well as private entities and individuals on these matters. The Ombudsperson also plays an essential part in the design and implementation of human rights legislation in the country and has the power to introduce proposals for improving legislation, to suggest the ratification of international human rights conventions, and to screen bills for their compliance with human rights principles.

To facilitate an enlightened national dialogue on the current and future roles of the Ombudsperson in the society and possible avenues for cooperation with other state agencies, the PCUz has organized national roundtables involving representatives from civil society organizations, state structures, and the media. It has also sponsored several study tours for decision makers from the Ombudsperson’s office to gain first-hand knowledge of best practices from independent national human rights institutions in other countries within the OSCE area.

To enable the staff of the Ombudsperson’s office to fully exercise the institution’s mandate, the PCUz has organized capacity-building events for the Ombudsperson’s regional representatives to better acquaint them with international norms and national legislation on issues relevant to human rights, such as the trafficking in human beings.

Transparency in and public awareness of the Ombudsperson’s activities are regarded as essential for the Institution to fully exercise its function. The PCUz has therefore supported the publication of the Ombudsperson’s yearly report in Uzbek, Russian, and English, so that citizens, officials, and international partners can become acquainted with the Institution’s activities. The PCUz is also supporting the introduction of an online platform enabling citi-

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3 *Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE*, Copenhagen, 29 June 1990, p. 16, at: <http://www.osce.org/de/odhr/elections/14304>.

4 *Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the Authorised Person of the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Human Rights (Ombudsman), (new version)*, Tashkent, 27 August 2004, No. 669-II, at: [http://www.theioi.org/downloads/34cni/Europe\\_Uzbekistan\\_Authorized%20Person%20for%20Human%20Rights\\_ombudsman%20Act\\_en.pdf](http://www.theioi.org/downloads/34cni/Europe_Uzbekistan_Authorized%20Person%20for%20Human%20Rights_ombudsman%20Act_en.pdf).

zens to file complaints electronically. With appropriate expertise and technical support provided by the PCUz, the Ombudsperson Institution has improved its internal mechanism for handling complaints, enhanced the capacities of its staff to monitor the human rights situation, promoted understanding of its mission and competencies among state structures, and reinforced its interaction with civil society institutions, thereby strengthening its position as a national human rights institution.

### *Counteracting Trafficking in Human Beings*

Trafficking in human beings (THB) is a form of modern slavery that robs people of their basic rights and freedoms and often goes hand in hand with torture and ill-treatment. In recent years, the PCUz has assisted the government and civil society of Uzbekistan in increasing their efforts to counteract human trafficking. The PCUz provided training to Uzbekistan's Inter-agency Anti-trafficking Commission, highlighting good practices and outlining the key challenges facing the OSCE region in order to promote a more systematic and sustainable effort to counteract human trafficking and improving coordination between the different stakeholders such as police, health and social services, and NGOs.

The projects also sought to build capacity to identify and assist victims of THB among groups most at risk. Specific training courses were designed for the diplomatic and consular personnel of the foreign ministry, frontline police officers in railway stations and airports, and workers in the hospitality sector.

Together with the Lawyers' Training Centre under the Ministry of Justice, the PCUz developed a training manual aimed at formalizing the counter-trafficking curriculum for in-service trainees. The manual is now available in Russian and Uzbek and is used by the training centre.

The office of the PCUz also worked with the National Federation of Trade Unions and women's rights NGOs on preventing human trafficking by empowering at-risk groups through education and developing business entrepreneurship skills. A pilot project was started in Tashkent Region on promoting small-scale businesses, ensuring sustainable income through stable government contracts to its beneficiaries, who are women from at-risk groups.

By virtue of its project activity, the PCUz has secured recognition for the OSCE by the host government as one of the key organizations in tackling human trafficking. Uzbekistan is eager to realize joint projects with the PCUz and actively participates in the OSCE's wide-ranging anti-trafficking initiatives. This co-operation goes beyond enhancing the investigation and prosecution of trafficking crimes. Efforts were also made to prioritize the protection of victims and the provision of assistance, including the right to effective legal remedy and compensation. The PCUz brought added value to efforts to

counter human trafficking at the national level by promoting co-operation with civil society, trade unions, and the private sector alongside the traditional criminal justice-based approach. The PCUz was the first organization on the ground to address the impact of new information technologies on human trafficking, including the online recruitment of victims and the new challenges the internet brings for law enforcement responses to human trafficking.

### *Conclusion*

For 20 years, the PCUz and the government of Uzbekistan have been travelling companions. From the opening of the first OSCE field presence in Central Asia in Tashkent to the present, the authorities and the field operation have pursued consistent and constructive engagement on a broad variety of issues.

Over that time, the PCUz has built enduring relationships with national institutions, and this co-operation has borne fruit. In general, Uzbekistan is a contributor to the security and stability of Central Asia and the entire OSCE area. The activities of the PCUz are helping to build on this achievement. The field mission has strived to promote OSCE commitments by showing how they help to create security and build a prosperous society. The PCUz stands ready to continue to use its flexibility and efficiency in assisting the government to tackle the challenges of the future by transferring experience, lessons learned, and best practices from the other OSCE participating States.