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The OSCE Central Asia Liaison Office

The OSCE Central Asia Liaison Office (CALO) began operations in June 1995 in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent on the basis of a decision of the Permanent Council of 16 March of that year. Integrating the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan more fully into the OSCE is regarded as CALO's most important job. In establishing CALO as an OSCE representation in Central Asia, the Organization was reacting to infrastructural and financial difficulties in Central Asian countries that made it harder for them to make more of a commitment to the OSCE.

While the mandates of OSCE missions are generally adapted to specific conflicts, CALO's work is oriented towards the overall goals of the OSCE such as the establishment of democratic procedures and advancing the structures of civil society, along with sustainable economic development. This difference is also reflected in CALO's formal status; unlike the missions, it is a part of the OSCE Secretariat rather than of the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC). Thus it is directly subordinate to the Secretary General and reports to him, not to the director of the CPC as the missions do.

Until May 1996 CALO was staffed only with a Head of Office and local secretariat personnel. Since that time the Head of Office has been assisted by a human dimension expert. In early 1998 the Office was enlarged to include an additional human dimension expert and an economic and environmental expert. Since the beginning of 1998 a regional election co-ordinator from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has also been delegated to CALO to run its election assistance programmes. Thus the Office personnel structure reflects to some extent the chief elements of its work: monitoring and providing assistance in the field of human rights and promoting the building of civil society including, in particular, non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The economic dimension of the OSCE is a part of this as well; for example, CALO analyses developments relating to the environment and the economy insofar as they affect security and makes available OSCE mechanisms to regulate them. In addition, CALO supports the Central Asian countries in their efforts to implement and improve democratic election procedures.

CALO works directly with political parties and movements, local and international NGOs, scientific and scholarly institutions and international organizations, just as it does with the governments of the five Central Asian countries. In contrast to international donor organizations and assistance programmes such as the World Bank, TACIS and the UNDP, the OSCE offers almost no programmes for, say, technical or financial assistance. CALO has,

however, succeeded in turning to its own advantage the fact that there is little or no money for co-operative projects of a technical nature. Organizations that have no programmes of their own can serve as mediators between competing donor organizations. They are capable of introducing a point of view that is independent of financial interest and the pressures of implementation into bogged down negotiations between governments and donor organizations.

Despite the steady expansion of staff, CALO was unable, with four members (plus the ODIHR representative), to meet its regional responsibilities fully. Because distances are too great and the infrastructure too weak, the Tashkent office has not been able to co-operate satisfactorily with the other countries. Although most CALO employees spent half of each month travelling in the other Central Asian countries or in the provinces of Uzbekistan, this was not enough to dissipate criticisms from the governments in Bishkek, Almaty and Ashgabat that CALO was concentrating too heavily on Uzbekistan. A clear division of labour has been worked out with the OSCE Mission to Tajikistan through which the Mission has taken over CALO's responsibilities in that country while CALO gives the Mission logistical support.

If co-operation between the OSCE and the Central Asian countries is not yet very intensive, it would nevertheless be wrong to explain this solely in terms of CALO's inability, as a result of its geographic situation and meagre staffing, to operate throughout the entire territory. A number of Central Asian countries also bear responsibility for their own rather superficial co-operation with the OSCE because their governments, in certain areas such as human rights and electoral procedures, are not interested in having OSCE involvement beyond the level of mere declamation.

As a result of the Permanent Council's decision of 23 July 1998 to open OSCE Centres in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan CALO's responsibilities have undergone a change. Even though its mandate and status had not been altered as of the end of 1998, so that it formally retains its regional responsibilities, CALO's activities since the opening of the other OSCE Centres have been limited to Uzbekistan alone.

The Main Focal Points of CALO's Work

Because a second adviser on human dimension issues has been added to the staff this field has become a focal point, simply through personnel restructuring. As a consequence CALO has been in a position to give special attention to joint action with the local NGOs and to the relaxation of tensions in relations between them and the institutions of government. In other important areas of work, as in the human dimension, it holds true that conditions for co-operation vary a great deal in the various Central Asian countries. What this means is that the structures of civil society are differently developed and that

there is also great variation in the willingness of governments to accept NGOs as partners or to allow them to act as pressure groups.

CALO regularly organizes discussion groups with representatives of the NGOs and government in order to enhance mutual understanding for the interests and needs of each side. These talks have frequently revolved around a subject area agreed upon in advance - e.g. women's affairs or environmental problems - so as to ensure that they result in improved and readily verifiable co-operation on both sides. In 1998 more than ten such meetings between government and NGOs occurred in this manner. As CALO saw it, it was important to hold these discussions not just in capitals but also in the provinces because that is where the institutions of the state have particularly strong reservations about the NGOs.

The discussion groups have turned into a very effective instrument for reducing mutual prejudices amongst NGOs and government representatives. But there have been misunderstandings as well - both between government representatives and NGOs and also with respect to the OSCE's role. Government representatives, in particular, were unhappy with CALO's policy of inviting, among others, those NGOs which had not (yet) been given governmental approval. For the OSCE, however, it was important to insist on this procedure because government institutions are in the habit of using refusal or delay of such approvals as a method of repression against NGOs. NGO representatives, on the other hand, accused the OSCE of having a double standard: for example, they felt that it did not criticize certain matters such as legislation on NGOs or elections as toughly and persistently as it would have done in the case of comparable legislation in a Western democracy.

The discussion groups initiated by CALO are supplemented by co-operative bilateral relationships with the government and with NGOs. One topic of special talks with governmental institutions, for example, was the national legislation on NGOs, which the OSCE regarded as unsatisfactory in a number of cases. CALO's direct collaboration with NGOs emphasizes the arrangement of contacts with donor organizations and assistance programmes such as those of UNDP and USAID. In cases where it seems justified CALO also acts as an advocate for the NGOs in their relations with the government.

In addition to the meetings between government and NGOs arranged by CALO there are also numerous events dealing with the human dimension which it plans in collaboration with ODIHR. These include, e.g., seminars on human rights for lawyers, human rights training for border guards and a regional seminar for NGOs that work for the advancement of women in Central Asian societies.

The second focal point in connection with the human dimension involves monitoring the human rights situation. Limiting regional representation to Tashkent was particularly disadvantageous in this area. One reason was that such procedures as the observation of criminal trials where political motivation was suspected were strictly limited to Uzbekistan. Moreover, the sus-

pected victims of human rights violations who have found their way to CALO have been almost exclusively from Uzbekistan and its capital, Tashkent.

When a number of police officers were murdered in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan and Islamic extremists were held responsible, CALO took a particular interest in the trial of the suspected offenders. Another court proceeding that attracted interest involved Afghan refugees in Uzbekistan who had fled during the war in Afghanistan and now, after over ten years, were to be deported to their homeland. Close co-operation with other international organizations such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as with the embassies of OSCE participating States and NGOs, proved to be very effective in such situations. Often CALO co-ordinates with NGOs, international organizations and the diplomatic representations of OSCE participating States on concrete proceedings at their regularly initiated "discussion group on human rights".

The OSCE's economic dimension, which until the appointment of a Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities in early 1998 tended to be a stepchild of the Organization, has since May 1998 been represented in CALO by an economic and environmental expert - the first time it has been present in one of the field offices of the OSCE. The work of this expert is aimed at analysing security-relevant developments in the fields of economics and the environment and, in some cases, offering Central Asian governments the services of the OSCE as negotiator in conflicts that arise in these areas.

With regard to the economic dimension, CALO views regional water management as a matter of particular concern. All countries of Central Asia are directly dependent on the distribution of water from the two great rivers, Syr Darya and Amu Darya. But they have not yet reached the point of deciding who is going to get how much water. The governments of Central Asia know that as a result of the explosive population growth in the region this issue has especially dangerous potential and they have so far refused categorically to discuss the problem. Rather, the differing interests of the upstream countries - Kyrgyzstan (Syr Darya) and Tajikistan (Amu Darya) - and the downstream countries - Kazakhstan (Syr Darya), Uzbekistan (Syr Darya and Amu Darya) and Turkmenistan (Amu Darya) - with regard to seasonal use of water and purposes for which it is used, have assumed ever greater importance. Kyrgyzstan, for example, depends on water during the winter for generating electricity while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan need it during the summer to irrigate their cotton fields. However, the two downstream countries do not have sufficient storage capacity to store until summer the water that Kyrgyzstan uses for energy production during the winter and it is consequently lost to them. During the Soviet period there were agreements between the Central Asian republics which took account of the close relationship between water and energy management and consequently required that

the downstream countries deliver fuel or energy to the upstream countries in winter. After independence, the downstream countries no longer felt bound by these agreements and the parallel use of water resources in winter and summer over a period of years would have already led to a collapse of the water supply in 1998 if there had not been an unusually large amount of rainfall.

The situation in the Aral Sea region is closely tied to the problem of water management in Central Asia. There are still about three million people who live there with polluted drinking water. Infant mortality and the spread of the typical diseases of deprivation and poverty such as typhus, anaemia and tuberculosis are many times higher in this region than they are in other areas of Central Asia. That there has as yet been no migration on a scale to threaten security is due solely to the traditional strong roots binding the residents of the Aral Sea region to their homeland.

In the area of economics, along with the other problems characteristic of states in transition, particularly trade barriers between the Central Asian countries are a cause for concern. High import duties and taxes imposed illegally by customs and police units result in such high transportation costs that trade in certain goods is no longer profitable. One example is that vehicles with Tajik license plates are completely forbidden to cross the border into Uzbekistan, a condition under which the northern part of Tajikistan, in particular, suffers greatly. Frequent changes in import and export regulations also lead to delays or to the complete collapse of deliveries.

In May 1998 CALO began working on an inventory of regional and national environmental and economic problems in Central Asia. From the very beginning the governments of the Central Asian countries welcomed this OSCE initiative. First CALO was forced to make clear to international donor organizations, which view the OSCE exclusively as a political actor, that the OSCE does not want to be placed in the category of donor organization in development work with Central Asian states. On the contrary, the OSCE perspective also in the environmental and economic sphere must remain based on security policy. Initially, the representations of the EU member countries also took a wait-and-see attitude towards the OSCE's involvement in economic and environmental matters.

The Central Asian governments, despite or perhaps precisely because of their strong interest in the OSCE's economic dimension, are trying to use the Organization as a forum for the formulation and implementation of their national economic interests. For the most part CALO supports this policy, but there are two exceptions: first, there are many problems - e.g. water management and the related problem of the Aral Sea - which can only be solved at the regional level; second, from the standpoint of security the OSCE is strongly interested in an intensification of regional economic co-operation. This position does not contradict the national interests of the Central Asian states but it does shift the focal point of OSCE involvement. As a conse-

quence, CALO is trying very hard to support regional organizations, institutions and associations and, as far as possible, to give them a voice in the network of OSCE institutions. Among them are the Interstate Council of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (ICKKTU), which seeks to advance economic co-operation in the region, and the Regional Energy Dispatcher Board, an association of Central Asian energy suppliers, and also the initiative of Central Asian NGOs to found a regional centre for the environment.

An OSCE seminar on "Regional Environmental Problems and Co-operative Approaches to Solving Them", held in September 1998 in Tashkent, was aimed at making clear the OSCE's willingness to serve as a forum for negotiating on environmental conflicts. In putting together the programme for the seminar CALO sent a clear signal that the OSCE does not only view environmental problems as the cause of human tragedies but also takes them seriously as a risk to security. Along with regional water and energy management, the discussion also went into the cleaning up of storage sites for radioactive waste. These stock piles, where among other things waste material from East German uranium mines is stored, were started in the fifties and sixties in areas where landslides are frequent and are today at risk of being washed away by rain and rivers, which could result in the radioactive contamination of the entire Syr Darya river system.

In 1999 the economic and environmental expert will have the job of making clear that the OSCE is a reliable partner to the Central Asian governments in negotiations on regional economic and environmental problems. The same holds true for the OSCE's collaboration with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Guided by its experiences in other regions, UNECE has established a Special Programme for Central Asia (SPECA) which is designed to bring about closer co-operation between Central Asian governments in the fields of transportation, small and medium-sized firms, and water and energy management. Since UNECE does not have its own office in Central Asia, there are plans to have the OSCE take over SPECA responsibilities on the local scene. Here, too, only the future will reveal how well the OSCE can perform the role assigned to it.

The OSCE's regional election co-ordinator does not belong directly to the CALO staff but is delegated by ODIHR. Still, he must be included in any analysis of the work done by CALO. CALO's partners all view him as a member of the Office. Moreover, his activities, over and above the ODIHR's election assistance programmes, have a strong influence on CALO's overall policies. The OSCE's election assistance programmes for Central Asia include election monitoring, training for members of national election commissions, and the responsibility for subjecting election laws to a critical analysis and, in some cases, offering suggestions for their improvement. CALO has not been equally successful in all fields.

Co-operation with the Central Asian countries in monitoring elections has by now become a more or less routine and professional matter. It involves not only requests from the Central Asian countries themselves - e.g. for the dispatch of OSCE observers to the presidential elections in Kazakhstan in January 1999 and to a constitutional referendum in Kyrgyzstan in October 1998 - but also the sending of OSCE observers from Central Asia to observe elections elsewhere, for example in Bosnia in September 1998. The OSCE's decision not to send observers to the Kazakh presidential elections was a clear message to the Central Asian countries that the OSCE is not prepared to give undemocratic election procedures *a priori* legitimation through the presence of OSCE observers. Through regular visits to Kazakhstan in advance of the elections by the Head of the Liaison Office and the election co-ordinator, CALO tried to co-ordinate the efforts of the various diplomatic missions of OSCE participating States with the aim of persuading the Kazakh government to correct its election procedures.

The ODIHR's training programmes for members of election commissions in the Central Asian countries as well as a seminar for "young election professionals" were also very successful. Despite initial reservations and a few refusals on the part of Central Asian governments these events were marked by open and critical discussions. The fact that the election co-ordinator was "on the scene" and not a great distance away in the ODIHR in Warsaw was considered a big plus in the later assessment of the seminars.

The efforts of the OSCE to exercise a corrective influence on national election laws turned out to be more difficult. In Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan CALO tried to discuss the election laws in workshops with representatives of appropriate government offices, following an analysis by the ODIHR. The reservations of the Central Asian governments could be clearly seen in the fact that in one case it took six months to persuade the government even to agree to such a workshop. Nevertheless, both workshops in the end produced very fruitful and open discussions.

Old Structural Problems and New Responsibilities

The Permanent Council's decision to open OSCE Centres in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan solved a big problem for CALO - how to meet the responsibilities of a regional office without the necessary personnel resources for the job. The quadrupling of staff and the three additional Centres in Central Asia made it possible for the OSCE to co-operate on an equal basis with all of the Central Asian countries.

The new Centres, which were opened at the end of 1998 and the beginning of 1999, will have an additional effect on the work of the OSCE, whether this is wanted or not; in many fields it will result in a nationalization of their activities. This could already be observed in December 1998 in CALO when the

Head of Office changed course by visiting various provincial governors. Previously his visits had all been to representatives of the national government level, so that this pointed to a new emphasis in CALO policy.

Nationalization will lead to greater efficiency in several classic fields of OSCE activity. The human dimension, for example, involving observation of the human rights situation and providing support for the structures of civil society, can be readily taken out of the regional context and adapted to national requirements. However, in other areas such as the economic dimension there is certainly the risk that the establishment of national Centres will be at the expense of badly needed regional cohesion. Water and energy management, along with the easing of cross-border trade, are matters that in Central Asia have to be dealt with multilaterally. In these areas the OSCE Centres will also have to work very closely together.

Up to a certain point there are structural reasons that make it difficult for the OSCE to meet its objective of enhancing security in Central Asia by improving regional co-operation. Even though the Central Asian governments constantly express, at least verbally, their strong support for regional co-operation as an instrument of security policy, this hardly conceals the fact that since the collapse of the Soviet Union the notion of national security has in fundamental ways been tied to a striving for autarchy. In economic and energy policy and in connection with water management it becomes especially clear that national security is being equated with the greatest possible independence from imports. The many and varied agreements on intensifying regional co-operation - the ones signed in the Interstate Council, for example - should not mislead us into thinking that these are anything but declarations of political intent which the governments, without hesitation, can rapidly contradict a short time later through national ordinances or laws.

Although political efforts to orient the idea of national security towards national borders are understandable in light of the co-operation formerly prescribed by the Soviet Union, in everyday political life the current security doctrines of the Central Asian countries represent a serious obstacle to CALO's desire to translate the security relevance of regional co-operation into political action. Whether the opening of new OSCE Centres strengthens the regional content of security policy or leads to a further nationalization of the security debate will depend not least on the co-operation of these Centres with one another. The experience of the OSCE missions has shown that, even though the missions need a measure of freedom in their operations, their work urgently needs to be co-ordinated by the CPC in Vienna.

The image of the OSCE as it has developed since the establishment of CALO in Central Asia is a problem that should not be underestimated. Although its field of responsibility is actually much broader, the OSCE is viewed in Central Asia above all as an organization that has put respect for human rights at the centre of its activity. Central Asian governments in particular find fault with CALO for having in the past put too little emphasis on other areas of

security policy and for concentrating too strongly on the problems of human rights. Understandably, the Central Asian governments have little interest in being criticized constantly by the OSCE for the weaknesses in their human rights policy. From the institutional standpoint this perception represents a problem because nothing could be more damaging for the OSCE than if in its local activities it is perceived as being nothing more than a human rights organization.

In this connection CALO managed to gain some ground in 1998 through the enlargement of its staff. Support for the building of civil society, assistance with elections and their preparation, and CALO's involvement in economic and environmental affairs present a more differentiated picture than in past years. Nevertheless, there is criticism, e.g. that a regional seminar on security policy held in February 1998 in Ashgabat was for the most part left hanging without further analysis or follow up. The Organization must make better use of such opportunities to demonstrate to its partners in Central Asia with greater emphasis, co-operativeness and continuity that it is serious about the issues discussed at the seminars and about the objectives it enunciates in collaboration with the governments.