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"Renewing Dialogue – Rebuilding Trust – Restoring Security": Germany's 2016 OSCE Chairmanship – A Personal Retrospective and a Vision for the OSCE in 2025

Germany's 2016 OSCE Chairmanship in Retrospect

I believe the results of Germany's OSCE Chairmanship can be summed up in a few theses:

First: It was right to assume responsibility for the OSCE and, hence, for the European security architecture. Precisely because the security situation in Europe is more critically balanced than at any time since the end of the Cold War, the German Chairmanship was keen to take a stand for multilateralism and a rules-based order by committing itself to the revitalization of the OSCE. The Organization remains the only forum where dialogue between all sides is ongoing, though it is increasingly a dialogue between adversaries and less one among like-minded – or at least respected – partners, as it was in the early days of the Charter of Paris.

Under current conditions – continuing deterioration of relations with Russia, erosion of the OSCE's normative basis, no substantive progress in implementing the Minsk Agreements on the conflict in and around Ukraine, a flare-up of the precarious Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during our Chairmanship in April 2016 – we had no choice but to focus on at least containing negative developments, preventing the emergence of new conflicts, and defending the OSCE *acquis* against growing opposition, particularly in the human dimension.

The unpromising situation we inherited meant there could be no guarantee of success for our OSCE Chairmanship. Nevertheless, we were able to make our priorities felt in several key regards:

The foreign ministers of the OSCE participating States had expressly requested more opportunities for dialogue at the Belgrade Ministerial Council in 2015. On 1 September 2016, in response to this, an informal OSCE ministerial meeting was held for the first time in many years, and was well received. The format used in Potsdam was taken up by the 2017 Austrian OSCE Chairmanship, who held another such meeting on 11 July, dedicated to the topics of combating terrorism and security policy/conventional arms control. This format should also be continued by the coming chairmanships.

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

Wherever reasonable and practical, we involved the OSCE Troika (consisting of the previous Chairmanship, the current Chairmanship, and the coming Chairmanship) to ensure greater continuity and thematic stability. The adoption of an agenda for the future of the OSCE by the foreign ministers of Germany, Austria, and Italy at the Ministerial Council in Hamburg created new momentum and defined a framework for priority fields of action on the part of the Organization: developing new forms of dialogue, strengthening sustainable conflict resolution, reviving conventional arms control, collectively addressing global challenges, and creating an OSCE that is more capable of delivering results.[1]

And finally, we were able to establish economic connectivity – i.e. creating linkages, integrating, and establishing economic co-operation, which can also help to build political confidence – and migration as two new key political topics within the OSCE and give each of them concrete form by means of a Ministerial Council Decision. We also expanded OSCE discussions of cyber issues to all three OSCE dimensions and were able to achieve consensus to adopt a second package of confidence-building measures on cyber-security in spring 2016. The OSCE is, thus, the only UN regional arrangement to pass measures of this kind. Other regions of the globe, such as East Asia, are looking to the OSCE and wish to learn from it in this regard.

Figure 1: Informal meeting of OSCE foreign ministers on 1 September 2016 in Potsdam – Glienicker Bridge (© Photothek)

1 Cf. *Hamburg Declaration of the incoming OSCE Troika: A Strong OSCE for a Secure Europe*, MC.GAL/11/16, 9 December 2016, at: http://www.osce.org/cio/287946.

Second: Deep reservations exist "East of Vienna" at the thought of a more effective OSCE. During its Chairmanship, however, Germany exerted considerable effort to encourage the overcoming of old thinking and to enhance the Organization's capabilities:

One central concern was to enhance the abilities of the OSCE across the entire conflict cycle – particularly with regard to civil crisis management, as a means of solidifying the OSCE's role as a regional arrangement under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. Therefore, in 2016, we initiated a dialogue among the participating States and organized conferences throughout the year where we used our Chairmanship role to discuss topics, including mediation, dialogue facilitation, early-warning, crisis response, and strategies for lasting peace. On the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2016, a number of foreign ministers attended a high-level side event on strengthening civil crisis management and the OSCE as a regional arrangement under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter.

However, despite organizing a special retreat for OSCE ambassadors on the topic of the conflict cycle and carefully producing relevant draft decisions, the German Chairmanship did not succeed in achieving consensus among the OSCE participating States in the negotiations prior to the Ministerial Council on further practical steps, such as providing the OSCE Secretary General with a small fund to strengthen the OSCE's ability to react to developing crises. Nonetheless, there was a very broad consensus among the OSCE participating States in favour of continuing to work intensively on this topic. In operational terms, at least, we succeeded in placing practical cooperation with other organizations on a permanent footing by, for instance, establishing a UN liaison officer at the OSCE, who will, among other things, facilitate the adoption of UN standards by the OSCE.

The German Chairmanship dedicated a great deal of attention to the topic of the OSCE's legal personality, as the practical limitations that prevent the OSCE from performing effective conflict prevention and crisis management are obvious: The OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) cannot lead crisis operations, such as the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (SMM); the OSCE is restricted in its ability to enter into contracts in areas, such as tendering out services, and contracts of employment often have to be handled by the incumbent OSCE Chairmanship.

A further achievement of the German OSCE Chairmanship was the timely adoption of the OSCE budget. Though it should be a formality, the passing of the budget is all too often an annual struggle for the new Chairmanship. This was no exception in Germany's case and it was only on New Year's Eve 2015, one day before the start of our tenure, that we finally managed to overcome the tough opposition of a number of participating States, thanks, in part, to the strenuous efforts at the highest levels of the German Federal Foreign Office. It should be noted, in particular, that we succeeded in

creating four new positions at the CPC to help it shoulder the sharp rise in work it has had to face, partly as a result as of the SMM.

Another thing I consider an achievement of our Chairmanship was our success, under difficult conditions and in the teeth of fierce opposition from a number of participating States, in ensuring that the most important annual event in the OSCE's human dimension, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), was held as planned in Warsaw.

On the other hand, it is deeply regrettable and does not augur well for the OSCE's *acquis* of values, that obstinacy on the part of several states East of Vienna made it impossible to achieve consensus on key draft decisions in the human dimension at the Ministerial Council Meeting in Hamburg, despite our tireless efforts. Examples include the proposed definition of anti-Semitism – important in areas such as criminal justice and education – and draft decisions on freedom of opinion and the media. Nonetheless, by holding high-level Chairmanship conferences on, for example, tolerance and diversity, we have made a contribution to ensuring that the OSCE continues to deal with important topics of social concern, while simultaneously taking a stand against populism and intolerance.

It was also deeply regrettable that no decisions were taken during Germany's Chairmanship to appoint successors to the departing OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities. Despite strenuous efforts on Germany's part, it was not possible to put together the necessary consensus. Overall, it became clear that personnel questions and annual discussions of the budgets and mandates of field operations gave too many opportunities to those who seek to throw a spanner in the works of the OSCE.

Third: There can also be divisions among Western partners and allies on questions relating to the OSCE, and they do not take advantage of all the OSCE has to offer. So far, the EU has not made full use of the OSCE's potential as an instrument for its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

On budgetary questions, a number of the larger EU member states, in particular, have failed to recognize the role that the OSCE has played in strengthening common Western values and interests and are not willing to invest more in the Organization. Maintaining the policy of zero nominal growth means that the OSCE's already slim budget of just under 139 million euros in 2017 (roughly 141 million euros in 2016) is shrinking in real terms year on year, which leads to the OSCE gradually losing attractiveness compared to other organizations.

Furthermore, in 2016, the temptation of using the OSCE, above all, as a forum for pursuing disputes by means of verbal confrontation was once again unmistakable, even though this tends to lead to polarization among the participating States rather than the working out of common interests.

Taking this into account, it is hardly surprising, but still unsatisfactory, that the EU is not participating as effectively in OSCE decision-making as it should, particularly since EU members make up around half of OSCE participating States and contribute over 70 per cent of the Organization's budget. The fact that the OSCE Chairmanship will be held by four EU states in succession (Germany 2016, Austria 2017, Italy 2018, Slovakia 2019) provides the EU with an opportunity to advance a budgetary review process that would, among other things, question the sense of continuing the zero nominal growth policy.

Fourth: Germany worked hard to strengthen the OSCE's conflict-management instruments, particularly the then Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who made numerous trips to conflict areas: twice to Ukraine and also to Moldova/Transdniestria, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. However, the OSCE cannot resolve any conflicts without the political will of the participating States but can only, at best, contain them.

The focus on crisis management in and around Ukraine was to be expected: By providing close political and operational support – in areas such as staff acquisition, financing, and mission safety – we helped to ensure that the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine was even more effectively prepared to carry out its growing range of tasks – including closer integration with the Trilateral Contact Group and the Normandy Format.

With regard to the still precarious Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while the fighting that broke out in April 2016 was the fiercest of the last 20-plus years, it proved possible to, at least, contain it by means of diplomacy and mediation, and a fragile ceasefire was restored. Thereafter, at the initiative of the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, the German Chairmanship developed proposals for expanding the monitoring team of the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on the conflict, Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, and for a mechanism to investigate ceasefire violations. Unfortunately, neither of these proposals has, so far, been taken up.

By deliberately pursuing a strategy of incrementalism, we succeeded in bringing about a number of specific improvements in the remaining frozen conflict situations: In the Transdniestria conflict, we not only succeeded in organizing the first official meeting of the 5+2 format (the two conflict parties; the OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia as mediators; plus the USA and the EU as observers) for some time, but also achieved agreement on concrete steps to move forward in the areas of education and transport (Berlin Protocol) – recognition of Transdniestrian diplomas and vehicle number plates – and a Ministerial Council Decision on the final resolution of the conflict.

With respect to the conflict in Georgia, at the Geneva International Discussions between Georgia, Russia, the USA, and representatives of the breakaway entities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, under the joint chairmanship of the UN, the OSCE, and the EU, the previously suspended Incident

Prevention and Response Mechanisms at the administrative borders within Georgia were successfully restored.

Overall, therefore, despite occasional bouts of mere crisis management, small successes were achieved in resolving the protracted conflicts, which it is now incumbent to build upon. In this, one thing remains clear: With the instruments it possesses, the OSCE cannot resolve these conflicts. It can do no more than contain them and ameliorate their humanitarian consequences. Without the clear political will of all sides in the conflict, there can be no solutions.

Figure 2: Ukraine, destroyed bridge in Sloviansk (© Photothek)

Fifth: We were successful in reconfirming the role of the OSCE as the central platform for security dialogue in Europe. Perhaps the most significant decision of the Hamburg Ministerial Council was the announcement of the launch of a "Structured Dialogue" on current and future challenges and risks to security in the OSCE area. Activities within this framework have already begun, and an initial progress report was presented at the informal meeting of OSCE foreign ministers in July 2017. A number of meetings, attended by high-ranking representatives of OSCE States and chaired by Germany's OSCE Ambassador, Eberhard Pohl, were held to discuss the topics of threat perceptions, military doctrines, and force postures, as well as questions concerning the current rules-based European security order and the inadequate implementation of existing arms-control regimes, such as the Vienna Document, by individual participating States. At the formal Ministerial Council

Meeting in December 2017, the ministers took note of a report that enables the continuation of the Structured Dialogue and the transition to an operational phase in which the OSCE participating States, with the involvement of military experts, will agree on a method of representing force postures and military exercises in the OSCE area ("mapping") as a means of producing a commonly accepted military fact base that can be used to raise trust and predictability once again.

From a German point of view, it would be welcome if this initiative were also to expand later to encompass the topic of conventional arms control in Europe. More than ten years after Russia's de facto withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and, in view of Russian opposition to the position that the Vienna Document requires modernization, it is high time that the foundation was laid for new arms control instruments. We want to continue to contribute to this effort, in a way that stays true to our two-track approach of justified, proportionate, and purely defensive reassurance measures, on the one hand, and concrete offers of security dialogue to Russia on the other.

A key undertaking of the German Chairmanship – precisely in view of Russia's suspension of the CFE Treaty – was our consistent effort to ensure a substantial modernization of the Vienna Document. To this end, Germany, together with other OSCE participating States, made a range of concrete proposals to strengthen the mechanisms for risk reduction, for enhancing military transparency, for more effective verification measures, and for strengthening the OSCE as an impartial actor. A very large number of OSCE participating States agree with our approach that substantial modernization of the Vienna Document remains indispensable for security and co-operation in Europe.

In conclusion: It is worth investing in the OSCE and working to shape its available instruments. In the face of tangible scepticism on the part of a number of participating States, we successfully expanded political dialogue within the Organization while creating openings for new partners, including representatives of civil society. An example of the latter is the Chairmanship conference on "Connectivity for Commerce and Investment", which was held in Berlin in May 2016. It not only gathered together 900 participants from more than 60 states, but also boosted the involvement of the private sector in OSCE events, with more than half of the conference attendees representing the business community. The decision of the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship to extend our initiative and to keep the topic of connectivity high on its agenda is most welcome.

More than 90 outreach events sought to raise awareness among civil society organizations of opportunities in a range of areas where the OSCE can provide support. At the Hamburg Ministerial Council Meeting, a space was created for the first time to facilitate contacts between government delegates

and civil society representatives, and events were held on a wide range of current key OSCE issues. The large amount of positive feedback that we received on this new format following the Ministerial Council should encourage the creation of similar opportunities in the future.

And yet – the concept of multilateral security is currently being called into question in the OSCE area more strongly than at any time since the end of the Cold War. There are many widely different reasons for this: the Russian factor, isolationist tendencies in the USA, the growing self-confidence of OSCE participating States in regions such as Central Asia, and the growth of nationalism and populism. However, simply as a result of our deep integration in international political and economic structures, Germany's position can only be to support the strengthening of multilateralism and the processes of a rules-based order and international law. Finding allies for this, especially in the OSCE area, and continuing this work with trusted partners and friends will remain a priority task for German foreign policy in the near future. We can pursue this course within the OSCE by expanding the Organization's agenda to cover new challenges, allowing us to demonstrate the concrete benefits of co-operation – including connectivity, conventional arms control, migration, and the implementation of existing OSCE commitments in the human dimension.

"OSCE 2025" – A Positive Vision

In 2025, the OSCE will still be one of the world's largest co-operative security organizations. It will continue to perform its work – as usual. At its major meetings, almost all of its 57 participating States will still want to rise to speak their (usually prefabricated) words. Then it will be the turn of the Partner States. Not every speaker will stay within the time limit, particularly not those from the larger participating States. Repetition among all these speeches will be unavoidable. Perhaps it is just as important that the attendees get to know each other, see each other regularly, and fall into conversation on the margins of the official programme. The OSCE is a large organization like others, and it functions in the same way.

Some elements of this modus operandi produce familiarity. Since the conflict in Ukraine, no OSCE conference has taken place without a more or less disputatious exchange between the Russian and Ukrainian ambassadors. The equally predictable clash between the ambassadors of Armenia and Azerbaijan has an even longer history, which not infrequently comes out in relation to agenda items that have nothing to do with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Efforts to change this established and familiar way of working even slightly have no chance and are, therefore, never even attempted. The only thing that appears to offer a prospect of success is the "additive approach".

The German Chairmanship successfully implemented the idea of an informal ministerial meeting – with a limited number of participants and preferably without prepared statements – as an addition to the annual programme, and not as a substitute for one of the tried-and-trusted events on the calendar. Austria continued this innovation, perhaps turning this event into a "new OSCE tradition". Not a revolutionary departure, but an accommodation to an evident need for dialogue.

It is possible to imagine other meaningful changes to the OSCE's modus operandi. However, they are unlikely to be decisive for the reputation and success of "OSCE 2025". Yet what is urgently needed is a political success. Most of the major thematic conferences that the German 2016 Chairmanship looks back on with justifiable pride were barely acknowledged by the wider world. The OSCE's wide-ranging approach across so many topics can be traced back to the gravitational pull of the comprehensive CSCE process and the creation of the "three baskets". Above all, however, the OSCE is seen as a security organization. And so it is judged in terms of concrete political results.

The OSCE plays a vital role in the "protracted conflicts" in Georgia, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and the Republic of Moldova. All three, also long referred to as "frozen conflicts", have had bloody wars that claimed many victims in their recent past, yet represent attempts to avoid sliding back into armed conflict, instead waiting decades for a breakthrough that will enable a peaceful political solution. Whether in the form of the Minsk Group, the 5+2 talks, or the Geneva International Discussions, the OSCE is held responsible. Nonetheless, the affected populations have the impression that these processes are going nowhere; the conflicts appear to be under bureaucratic management rather than led down a path to political resolution. This criticism is not fair, as it ascribes too little responsibility to the major powers involved in the conflicts – but it does undermine the OSCE's authority.

That is even more the case with the conflict in Ukraine. Without the brave monitors of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM), we would have no reliable information on the conflict situation on the ground. And without the OSCE, the Trilateral Contact Group in Minsk and its four working groups would not be able to pursue their indispensable preparatory work towards finding a political resolution to the conflict – a task the Normandy Format has set itself. The problem here is that, despite the SMM and the Trilateral Contact Group, the fighting continues on a daily basis – at a cost of over 10,000 lives so far. The 13-point Minsk Agreement has been in place as a binding timetable for peace since 12 February 2015 – but it is simply not being adhered to, not even with regard to the ceasefire, which is its first point. Of course, no one can blame the OSCE for this, but the Organization is a visible part of a political process that can, at best, prevent the hostilities from intensifying and spreading, but has so far been unable to effect a breakthrough that could lead to a durable non-military resolution of the conflict.

I am convinced that nothing is so important for "OSCE 2025" as achieving a political success in the conflicts in which the OSCE is involved but which it cannot resolve on its own. Everybody knows that the bloody conflict in eastern Ukraine will end when both Moscow and Kyiv not only show the political will to end the fighting, but also act on this. The OSCE would partake in a success of this kind with long-term benefits. And the undoubtedly protracted work necessary to fully implement the Minsk peace plan could ask even more of the OSCE than is currently the case. Achieving peace in eastern Ukraine is vital for the population of the region. But it is also essential for the future of the OSCE.

My vision of "OSCE 2025" has one more key feature: The CSCE/OSCE is itself the child of a comprehensive confidence-building process, historically located within the final stage of the Cold War and the transition to a new European peace order, and developed in the process of the major CSCE conferences. Its binding canons of values and rules are the "Helsinki Final Act" (1975) and the "Charter of Paris for a New Europe" (1990). There can be no OSCE without mutual trust – that is no exaggeration.

As I have already had cause to observe, this mutual trust within the large OSCE family has been dealt lasting damage. In this context, it would be wrong to make Russia's behaviour at the start of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 entirely responsible for the loss of trust. The Russian annexation of Crimea and Moscow's support for the separatists in eastern Ukraine are not the triggers, but rather products of a process of alienation between East and West that has eroded trust over many years, and whose roots can be traced back to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. On this long journey, the phenomenon of "divergent narratives" has developed, i.e. entirely incompatible perceptions of the same political process. The West falsely imagined it was working in partnership with the Russian Federation based, above all, on an intensification of economic co-operation and support for reform and modernization processes ("strategic partnership", "modernization partnership"), while Moscow experienced one frustration after another – at the West's refusal to create a "level playing field", particularly in relations with the United States, and the Western policies of NATO and EU eastward enlargement, which Russia saw as provocative and anti-Russian acts.

The destructive effects of this narrative divergence on the foundation of mutual trust only became evident at a remarkably late stage. Even if it proves possible soon, as I hope it will, to find a lasting political solution to the worst result of the long-term alienation process, namely the conflict in Ukraine – this would not restore the foundation of trust. To achieve this would require a far more broad-based reconciliation process, one that would have to extend to the points at which the narratives started to diverge, but also to discuss key concepts, such as double standards in international politics, the question of whether jointly developed norms and principles are truly unbiased, all the

way to the issue of a "new world order" and the responsibility of major powers in shaping a new multipolar global system.

Where can a process of this kind be set in motion and reach the correct level? I see no real alternative to relying on the OSCE, which has been particularly damaged by the aforementioned erosion of trust. It was correct for Germany's 2016 Chairmanship to start things moving in the direction of civil society. It would be naive to hope that Western heads of government could suddenly sit down with President Putin and discuss the loss of mutual trust as a result of contradictory perceptions of political reality. The only research institute dedicated to the OSCE, the Hamburg-based Centre for OSCE Research (CORE), was the right place to launch the project entitled "Historical Narratives and Lessons for the OSCE Today", bringing together relevant civil society actors to consider the processes that took place on the road to the Charter of Paris in 1990. That is the right approach, and deserves support. But more is needed.

For the path to "OSCE 2025", I would wish opportunities to be found to expand this discourse on renewing trust within the OSCE and to bring it ever closer to the level of political decision-making. At the moment, we are all caught up in an ever-expanding "blame game". This is true of the fighting on the line of contact in eastern Ukraine, where both sides blame the other for breaking the ceasefire, but it also applies to the question of political transgressions more generally. Whenever the West criticizes the contravention of international law in Russia's Ukraine policy, the answer is a counter-accusation that takes aim at Western policy in relation to, for example, Kosovo or the Iraq war. We need to find a way out of this trap. And I would not rule out the possibility that we will ultimately have to fall back on the example of the CSCE conferences of the 1970s. In any case, the OSCE remains the location where restoring understanding, predictability, and trust is offered a chance that must be grasped.

One final point in reference to "OSCE 2025": I have already mentioned that the then German Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, made the attempt in 2016 to return disarmament and arms control to the OSCE agenda – issues that had enjoyed significant prominence throughout the OSCE's history. One need only recall the CFE process. A large number of participating States support this approach, which has since made cautious progress under the name of "Structured Dialogue". Initial agreement was made to undertake "mapping" of force postures and military exercises. The path that leads to addressing questions of conventional arms control may still be long and before we get there, it will be necessary to overcome the scepticism and reluctance of a large number of participating States. But who other than the OSCE is in a position to kick start the reversal we urgently need to stop the steady process of military escalation as a consequence of the conflict in Ukraine?

We have to acknowledge: Both sides are either already rearming rapidly or at least preparing to do so. Additional troops are being deployed, the num-

ber and scope of military exercises and manoeuvres increase every year, and military overflights with no prior notification are being carried out by aircraft without transponders and are frequently met by interceptors, on an almost daily basis. It is only a matter of luck that there have been no serious incidents so far. Some observers see this as a return to Cold War conditions.

An OSCE whose prestige and ability to solve problems is enhanced by successful political resolution of the conflict in Ukraine or of the "protracted conflicts", which succeeds in becoming a key platform for the restoration of lost trust by reconciling the divergent narratives and initiating a change of direction in the current military escalation process and putting disarmament and arms control back on the agenda – that would be my own personal vision of a successful and forward-looking "OSCE 2025".