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PROMOTION OF DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE IN
CENTRAL ASIA: A CRITICAL APPRAISAL**

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The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Promotion of Democratic Governance in Central Asia: A Critical Appraisal*

Abstract: Central Asian regimes have effectively maintained autocratic systems and have been rather impervious to western policies of democratisation. This paper takes a critical reading of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's (PA) role in promoting democratic governance in Central Asia, arguing that there are two main reasons for the institution's limited successes in the region, namely the very nature of the International Parliamentary Institutions, which have limited ability to activate political influence at the governmental level; and the inability of the OSCE PA to develop more active networks with transnational civil society to enhance transparency and participation in Central Asia.

Keywords: International Parliamentary Institutions, OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Central Asia, democracy.

Introduction

Parliamentary institutions are usually neglected by academics dealing with global governance issues. They tend to be perceived as lacking the material power to elicit policies and to be nothing more than “expensive talking shops” (Cofelice, 2012: 278). In the case of regionalism, the parliamentary dimension has also been marginal, with the first examples being limited to consultative and coordinating functions in regional agreements focusing on economic issues. Cofelice (*ibidem*: 281) makes the argument that as the new regionalism evolved to multi-level forms of regional governance focusing on political issues, the parliamentary institutions became a central part of these new institutional architectures. They also gained more powers, including legislative and budgetary control. The author adds that “[m]oreover, their political agenda often includes references to ‘world values,’ such as security, human rights and development, the involvement of civil society, the promotion and consolidation of democracy and human rights at the national level (especially through election, observation and fact finding missions)” (*ibidem*). Gradually, thus, the practices of parliamentary cooperation

* A draft version of this paper was presented at the 8th ECPR Pan European Conference on International Relations, Warsaw, Poland, 18th - 21st September, 2013. This was part of a series of panels on “The IPIs role in Democratizing World Society: Conceptual and Empirical Considerations”.

required a more careful analysis by academia, on the nature and meaning of these new cooperative patterns.

The case of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA) falls under this category, as the nature of the organisation is eminently political and its different organs all seek to contribute to confidence-building and peace in the OSCE region. Democracy promotion and respect for human rights in the OSCE area are thus perceived as a structural part of the organisation's comprehensive security concept. Democracy is at the core of the OSCE's third dimension (or basket), the human dimension, focusing on the promotion of liberal human rights and free and fair electoral processes. With the fall of Communism and the end of the Soviet Union, the drive for democratisation in the OSCE area gained prominence and visibility in the work of the organisation. Illustrating this, the setting up of new bodies such as the Parliamentary Assembly, but also the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) was meant to provide the organisation with new tools to support democratic transitions "East of Vienna". Support for parliamentary development and monitoring of electoral processes and the rights of minorities and fundamental freedoms was at the top of the agenda. As Boonstra, Shapovalova and Youngs (2012: 409) argue, the OSCE has a strong track-record in setting standards for democracy; it is the actual implementation of these standards that is severely diminished, partly due to the very nature of the organisation, nested on the principle of political consensus and deprived of sanction mechanisms.

Moreover, democracy promotion by the OSCE has also been under severe criticism by Russia and some other participating states (Zellner, 2005). The argument is that the OSCE has been biased and has "lectured" its Eastern members on how to establish democracies in their countries, while neglecting human rights violations and limitations in democratic procedures in the West. ODIHR has been particularly under pressure, since it has privileged the monitoring of elections in the East and has been largely absent from western countries. Further adding to the fragility of the democracy promotion mechanisms of the OSCE, a dispute between the ODIHR and the OSCE PA on who should lead the electoral observation campaigns has sparked since the PA was established, in 1991. We will address this issue in more detail in this paper, but the outcome has been a competition for resources and political attention that has undermined the visibility and credibility of the OSCE's work, distracting attention from what is truly important. The divisions and competition inside the OSCE and the limited

scope of the PA's activities have put into question the ability of the institution in monitoring and promoting democracy even among its members.

In this context, the work of the PA in Central Asia is simultaneously made harder by the internal difficulties of cooperation with other OSCE organs and the regional context of Central Asia. The weak appeal of democratic standards for regional leaderships (including issues of political pluralism, institutional oversight of executive powers and rotating power positions) and the OSCE PA's limited mandate makes their work – although valuable – quite limited in terms of the political impact. Parliamentary oversight of Central Asian politics is virtually non-existent and only Kyrgyzstan has adopted a Parliamentary regime in the region. Moreover, the Organisation seems to assume that other priorities exist rather than support for democracy, namely issues related to border controls, fight against corruption and police reforms. Considering this context, the paper asks what are the most significant challenges faced by the OSCE PA in democracy promotion in Central Asia and how a critical analysis of its institutional mechanisms and political view of the region can help identify new approaches to improving the relevance of the parliamentary dimension for regional peace and stability.

Global parliamentary institutions and democracy promotion

Liberal democracy and parliaments are a natural fit. By its very nature, parliamentary institutions are at the heart of liberal democracy, providing control and oversight of the executive. Parliamentarians are directly elected by the people and respond to their constituencies (albeit in varying degrees), providing legitimacy to the exercise of power. Except for the European Parliament, parliamentary institutions at the global level are composed by parliamentarians elected to the national level and nominated to also take part in these regional or pan-regional parliamentary institutions. They thus carry indirect legitimacy, rather than a direct mandate to exercise oversight over some form of regional or global executive. Parliamentary institutions participate in the daily lives of their organisations, and address all issues on their agendas, depending on the nature of their mandates (economic, political, etc.). Thus, their contribution to the strengthening of democracy in global governance comes both from the mandates of their organisations, and from their contribution to the democratisation of global governance structures (Zürn, 2004).

The functions of parliamentary organisations in democratising global governance structures vary. In fact, international parliaments lack many of the functions of national

parliaments, since they have no legislative or budgetary functions and do not possess the ability to exercise binding control over executive power (Cofelice, 2012). Still, they ensure “legitimacy of political action by representing citizens’ interests, ensuring transparency and proving oversight of government action” (Habegger, 2010: 190). They also ensure participative and representational functions, which are particularly strong when there is wide participation in electoral processes. Besides these direct functions, indirect democratisation is one of the most important contributions of these organs. By providing a context of democratic socialization, international parliamentary institutions (IPIs) contribute to the empowerment of parliamentarians at the national level and to the development and sharing of best practices. Cofelice (2012) underlines other important supplementary functions, including intercultural dialogue, which is reflected in policy-making and action on human rights, democracy and global public goods. This function is particularly relevant since, as Malamud and Stavridis (2011: 106) argue, parliaments also function as “moral beacons”, restraining *realpolitik* behaviour of the states.

Ultimately, the democratic functions of parliaments start “at home”. This means that their most significant contribution is to ensure the democratic oversight of the institutions they are part of. Although the democratic deficit of international governance can be limited by the democratic nature of the states participating in these international organisations, the ability of national parliaments to supervise foreign policy is rather limited. Ultimately, therefore, the articulation between national parliaments and other oversight mechanisms within International Organisations is fundamental to assure the democratic nature of global governance. The inclusion of civil society actors and the improvement of transparency and control mechanisms, both at the domestic and regional/global level, are supplementary tools to the work of the parliamentarians (Habegger, 2010: 189).

The Parliamentary Assembly within the broader OSCE institutional context

The establishment of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975, with the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, did not institute a parliamentary body. The unique character of the CSCE Final Act rests on the fact that it is a political commitment by heads of government for cooperation of security issues in Europe, without allowing for sanctions over lack of implementation. The decision to set up a Parliamentary Assembly preceded the upgrading of the CSCE to the status of permanent

organisation, in 1995. In 1990, in Paris, the Heads of State and Government of the CSCE area decided that

Recognizing the important role parliamentarians can play in the CSCE process, we call for greater parliamentary involvement in the CSCE, *in particular through the creation of a CSCE parliamentary assembly*, involving members of parliaments from all participating States. To this end, we urge that contacts be pursued at parliamentary level to discuss the field of activities, working methods and rules of procedure of such a CSCE parliamentary structure, drawing on existing experience and work already undertaken in this field. (CSCE, 1990b: 13, emphasis added)

Parliamentarians from the CSCE area met in 1991, in Madrid, and initiated a process aimed at developing the preparatory work, which would lead to the establishment of the CSCE Assembly and the convening of its first meeting in Budapest on 3-5 July 1992, a few days before the CSCE Summit on 9-10 July 1992 in Helsinki (Fuchs and Winter, 1996: 355-356). Almost all participating states were represented by their parliamentarians, underlining the strong support behind this initiative, which contributed decisively to the strengthening of the CSCE process. The CSCE Assembly should discuss all subjects dealt with by the CSCE bodies and should actively contribute to the goals of the platform, namely conflict prevention and strengthening and consolidation of democratic institutions of the participating states (Habegger, 2010: 194).

However, as Habegger (*ibidem*: 187) further argues, “[t]he OSCE assembly is integrated in an institutionally loose structure of an organization strongly shaped by its intergovernmental self-conception and it continues to struggle for recognition and influence”. Due to the nature of the CSCE, the PA was set up as an independent body and is formally not part of the OSCE. Also, there are no coordinating organs between the executive and parliamentary parts of the organisation. Despite the fact that several declarations of the OSCE Summits and Ministerial Councils refer to the work of the PA and fully recognise it as one of the most important OSCE institutions; the lack of a formal link means that the dialogue between these two sets of bodies does not create obligations for participating states, limiting the impact of the parliamentary dimension of the OSCE’s work. The daily practice of relations between the OSCE PA and the executive organs of the organisation has provided room for learning and mutual influence, which are fundamental for the parliamentary dimension to have a real impact

on the ground. But the lack of formal obligations creates a context of permanent marginalisation of the parliamentarians, whenever member states' diplomats feel their interests are at stake.

The daily practice of relations between the OSCE PA and the executive bodies of the organisation uncovers a fundamental dimension in explaining the impact of the PA on the ground. The rules of procedure of the PA indicate as one central goal of this organ "to support the strengthening and consolidation of democratic institutions in the OSCE participating States" (OSCE PA, 2011). As we have seen, socialization of parliamentarians into the best practices of democratic control and participation is another fundamental function of international parliaments. In fact, this has been often underlined as one of the most significant contributions of the PA in terms of democratic development in the OSCE area. João Soares, the former-Head of the Portuguese delegation to the OSCE PA, who has served both as vice-president and president of the PA, stated that the OSCE PA has an important "active pedagogical democratic function" (Soares, 2007: 40). Andreas Nothelle, the Liaison Officer in Vienna for the OSCE PA also underlines the opportunities for exchange of information among parliamentarians (Nothelle, 2007: 348). Institutional authors explain these processes through logics of "appropriateness" (March and Olsen, 1999), arguing that besides the rational calculation of costs and benefits associated with deviant behaviour within institutions, member states' (and their representatives) actions are also driven by what is expected of them in a certain institutional environment. Thus, by upholding high democratic standards in their daily practices, the OSCE PA provides a learning environment for parliamentarians.

The OSCE PA has gradually developed a set of practices of dialogue and cooperation with the other bodies of the OSCE, in order to give visibility and meaning to its work. For instances, Assembly representatives participate in meetings of OSCE bodies, such as the Permanent Council (the OSCE main political body), OSCE Summits and Ministerial Councils. Also, "following a recommendation of the 1996 OSCE review meeting, the then chairman-in-office invited the Assembly president to take part in the meetings of the Troika (consisting of the current, previous and incoming chairpersons-in-office)" (Habegger, 2010: 195). More, the PA also stimulates political debate through the regular participation of the OSCE chairman-in-office in the Assembly's annual meeting, or by the fact that any member of the Ministerial Council has the right to attend the Assembly's sessions and to speak in debates, which provides the opportunity

for parliamentarians to engage in political dialogue. Ultimately, though, both this dialogue and the PA's recommendations do not create legal obligations nor have a binding character. Habegger (*ibidem*) concludes that “[a] historical overview of the Assembly's ‘policy impact’ shows the difficulties of eliciting reactions from the OSCE executive bodies, and references to the Assembly are rarely found in decisions or documents of the intergovernmental OSCE”.

Indirect parliamentary control is nevertheless possible. Due to the double nature of the parliamentarians' mandate (they are elected parliamentarians to their national parliaments, who are then nominated to also take up a mandate at the regional level), they can control their governments' foreign policies in the context of the OSCE's work. Thus, one of the functions that parliamentarians need to develop is the ability to control the incorporation of OSCE standards and recommendations into national legislation. This is a fundamental part of democracy promotion, since it represents the accountability of the participating states of the OSCE to the recommendations of the organisation they are part of. National parliamentarians represented at the multilateral level are in a privileged position to monitor this process, as they are a central part of the legislative process at home. As Esposito and Diaz-Plaja (2012) argue, the OSCE has made parliamentary development a central part of its practices, especially in South-eastern Europe, and has largely framed it as a crucial part of democracy promotion. They can also present written questions to the organisation's governing bodies, which are normally replied, even though this was a unilateral provision set by the Assembly.

Criticism has also been voiced towards the OSCE ambassadors in Vienna, regarding the undemocratic nature of the organisation, since it operates through a rule of consensus (consensus minus one, in some cases), whereas the PA works through majority voting. This elicits different learning experiences for member states and creates elements of resistance to change and reform inside the organisation and also at the level of the participating states. Overall, both the governmental and the parliamentary institutions suffer from the lack of fulltime political staff. In the PA, parliamentarians are double hated and naturally privilege their work at the national level. Among the OSCE participating states an increasing number is no longer represented by fulltime ambassadors to the OSCE. We thus, see that there is a discrepancy between the formal rules and the practices of democratic oversight of the OSCE itself, creating added elements of resistance to the principle of democracy promotion through socialisation.

Election observation is one area particularly important for the work of the OSCE PA. Through its participation in electoral observation missions, the PA has gained visibility internationally and has increased its internal profile in the OSCE. The OSCE PA became involved in electoral observation in 1993, following the appeal by the Swedish Chairperson-in-Office that parliamentarians use their unique experience and knowledge in this field. Initially limited to national parliamentary elections, the PA now actively participates in all sorts of public scrutiny in the OSCE area and elsewhere, where its participation has been requested. Despite the natural legitimacy of parliamentarians to act as electoral observers – since they are holders of elected offices –, the enlargement of the PA's functions to include election monitoring gave rise to a pernicious dispute with the ODIHR, which was created in 1990 with the Charter of Paris, to support the human dimension of security. The dispute over who should lead the monitoring teams, which responsibilities fall on which organisation, issues of budget and logistical support as well as the responsibility for issuing the final political statement were addressed in the 1997 Copenhagen Cooperation Agreement between the two organs. The agreement was negotiated between the PA and the Danish Chairmanship and attributes political leadership to the parliamentarians (Nothelle, 2007: 363). The ODIHR is made responsible for the long-term missions and providing technical support, whereas the PA leads the short-term missions on the ground on election days. These short-term missions should be headed by the President of the PA or other senior representative of the Assembly as a Special Coordinator representing the Chairman-in-Office (Degn, 2000: 367). This agreement, however, has not always avoided conflict.

This situation was further fuelled by Russia's claim that OSCE election monitoring was biased against Eastern states and its attempts to de-politicise the missions. ODIHR saw an opportunity to use this claim to reduce the role of the PA and it was only after the situation was made public that the delegations in Vienna accepted the crucial role of the parliamentarians. In fact it has been the PA who has supported Russia's claims that western states should also be subject to electoral observation. In the US presidential elections of 2004 and 2010, ODIHR did not carry full observation missions, and did not provide the OSCE PA with the needed logistical support. Ultimately the PA's missions were a success, not least since they were framed as important learning moments for parliamentarians coming from less consolidated democracies (Nothelle, 2007: 364). It is clear from this illustration that the PA's

dependence on the ODIHR's logistical support and limited budget create additional problems to its work in this crucial part of democracy promotion. This situation adds on to the lack of formal channels for daily interaction between the PA and the Ministerial Council and the suspicion of some member states regarding the PA's wish to be given more authority for democratic oversight of the institution.

The OSCE PA and democracy promotion in Central Asia

The work of the OSCE PA in Central Asia poses specific dilemmas, considering the limited reach of democratic practices in the region (Boonstra, 2012). Central Asia is inserted in a regional context where democratic examples are very limited, and where Parliaments are very weak, due to the Soviet heritage where parliaments were used as rubber-stamps of executive policies or due to the permanence of conflicts, as in the case of Afghanistan. Presidential systems are the rule, with rubber stamp parliaments controlled by the political parties established by political leaders in power for the sake of democratic appearances. The exception to this scenario is post-2010 Kyrgyzstan. Following a period of great political instability, which led the country through two popular uprisings (2005 and 2010) and hundreds death in ethnic clashes (2010), the country voted for the establishment of a Parliamentary democracy in a constitutional referendum held in June 2010. Despite the clear difficulties of being a parliamentary democracy in this region, the Kyrgyz example should be supported, not least by the OSCE PA in training the Kyrgyz parliamentarians into their new responsibilities. This would reinforce the standing of the PA as a promoter of democracy and improve its visibility in the region.

One of the most significant instruments at the disposal of the OSCE PA is the nomination of Special Representatives, who can assess and accompany specific issues in the OSCE area, including the rendering operational of OSCE recommendations for national governments. The PA has established the position of Special Representative for Central Asia, since 2007, with a mandate to

Encourage active participation by parliamentarians from Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan), as well as Mongolia, in the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly; Encourage the exchange of parliamentary practices in the region, through inter alia frequent parliamentary field visits from various OSCE regions to Central Asia; Promote regional co-operation at the level of national parliaments in all three OSCE dimensions; Engage with parliaments and civil society in Central Asia to elevate

the role of parliaments in the region, including focus on parliamentary oversight, transparency and regional co-operation; Liaise with OSCE field missions in the region, as well as relevant OSCE institutions, international organizations and diplomatic missions; Report to the President of the Assembly on developments in Central Asia, including opportunities for enhanced parliamentary dialogue. (OSCE PA webpage)¹

The impact of the Special Representatives has been much determined by the personality taking the position. Kimmo Kiljunen, the first OSCE PA Special Representative for Central Asia was quite active, namely during the crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Following Kyrgyz President Rosa Otumbayeva's request, the Special Representative led the process of establishing an International Fact Finding Mission to the events in Kyrgyzstan. This was a fundamental step in confidence-building and ultimately to improve the transparency and accountability of state institutions, which had proved quite fragile. This is one fundamental aspect of democracy promotion in Central Asia, since on the one hand political institutions are authoritarian and repressive, but on the other hand they are also rather weak, leaving the state exposed to dynamics of capture and criminal abuse. The events further underlined the fundamental part, which democracy promotion has in the consolidation of regional security.

As the crisis in Kyrgyzstan broke out, the PA also appointed a Special Representative for Kyrgyzstan, a Kazakh diplomat, Adil Akhmetov, who was mandated to accompany the events on the ground and the country's transition to a parliamentary democracy. By choosing a Kazakh national, the OSCE PA President had in mind that the liaison with the Kazakh Chairmanship of the OSCE would be easier, and thus assure an incorporation of PA's views in the political management of the crisis. The physical proximity between the two countries would also allow for a continuous first-hand assessment of the changes on ground.² Mr. Akhmetov travelled to Bishkek in 2010 with an OSCE delegation led by the Kazakh chairmanship illustrating the ability to influence political dialogue by the PA (*News from Copenhagen*, 2010). Moreover, the PA also organised a high level visit to Bishkek, in May 2010, including OSCE PA President João Soares and the Secretary General Spencer Olivier among other high ranking

¹ OSCE PA webpage, accessed on 20.03.2014, at <http://www.oscepa.org/about-osce-pa/special-representatives/1219-special-representative-for-central-asia>.

² Phone interview with João Soares, OSCE PA President, 4th September, 2013. He also underlined that this choice had its setbacks, since the Kyrgyz authorities were not satisfied to have their neighbours playing a role of oversight, due to some level of regional competition. Mr. Soares eventually began to play a more visible role himself, in his role of president of the PA, and travelled often to Kyrgyzstan in order to personally assess the situation on the ground.

officials. Special Representatives also have the task of accompanying the operationalisation of the OSCE PA recommendations at the national level. This is done in collaboration with working groups within the PA and the secretariat, which actually has more available time, despite its reduced size, to follow up on these issues. Thus, the maintenance of a Special Representative for Central Asia illustrates the concern with the region.

Seminars and conferences sponsored by the PA are another tool used to address problems in Central Asia. Two important examples can be referred to. The first took place in Oslo, 10-11 December 2007, and was a seminar dedicated to the topic “Regional Cooperation - The Nordic and Central Asian Experiences”, promoted by the first OSCE PA Special Representative for Central Asia, Mr. Kimmo Kiljunen. The seminar sought to share best practices and deepen political dialogue at the parliamentary level, but ultimately can only have limited impact in a political context where parliamentary democracy is discredited. The second example took place in Astana, in 2010, and debated the “OSCE Eurasian Dimension”, and dedicated a session to the case of Kyrgyzstan “The Crisis in Kyrgyzstan and Its Implications for Parliamentary Democracy” (OSCE PA webpage).³ These seminars lack the political impact which would come from a more high profile presence or the reference to their conclusions in the working of the political institutions of the OSCE. They are thus meant to be public signs of the OSCE PA’s work and opportunities for international exchanges in contexts where that is not always possible. In that sense, the parliamentarians’ work at this level provides an open door for dialogue, including with civil society, in contexts when political relations at the highest levels are not possible. This can be seen also as a form of parliamentary diplomacy (Stavridis, 2006).

Election observation is one of the central field activities of the OSCE PA in Central Asia, and as such, good cooperation with ODIHR is fundamental for the political goals of the missions to be reached. The missions further provide the PA with the opportunity to visit the region and cultivate personal contacts, which often dictate the level of political relations with local actors in a centralized context. Thus, the political impact of the OSCE PA’s work in Central Asia, at the level of democracy promotion, is mostly focused on election observation. As we have seen, this is where international media focuses more on the work of the Assembly and where the political

³ OSCE PA webpage, accessed on 20.03.2014, at <http://www.oscepa.org/meetings/conferences-a-seminars/591-2010-trans-asian-parliamentary-forum..>

weight of its statements can be reflected in the work of the OSCE. Central Asian countries, however, have a low record of electoral processes observed by the OSCE PA and of elections conducted in a transparent and lawful way. For instances, the first time the PA and the ODIHR took part in electoral observation in Tajikistan was in the Presidential elections of 2006, since before that only short term observers recruited by OSCE participating states' embassies in the country had been allowed (Portuguese National Assembly, 2008: 107). Turkmenistan has never had any of its elections fully observed by the OSCE, since no conditions are gathered for fair and transparent electoral processes.⁴ Despite the nature of the Turkmen regime, some visits have been possible to the country. During the presidential elections of February 2007, after the death of President Niyazov, a delegation of the PA visited the country; the only visit to the country by the OSCE PA, which was related to elections. The Turkmen parliament has also kept an erratic collaboration with the OSCE PA. Uzbekistan has remained outside of the PA's electoral observation efforts, and its parliamentarians have not taken part in the work of the PA. Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia, where no official visits by the PA have been allowed. This picture presents us with a very patchy framework of OSCE PA efforts to promote democracy in Central Asia through electoral observation.

From the analysis of the documents regarding election observation by the OSCE in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, we realise that, if on the one hand the presence of international observers has been used by local governments as a source of legitimacy for staying in power; on the other hand the criticisms voiced in the final reports are quite outspoken. Moreover, since international parliamentarians usually work closely together (OSCE PA, PA of Council of Europe (PACE), European Parliament, etc.), this reinforces the political relevance of their statements. In the case of Kazakhstan, the first mission of the OSCE PA was deployed as early as 1994, demonstrating the country's commitment to the OSCE. It was only until 1999 that the PA and ODIHR issued a joint report and only in 2004 did the PA of the Council of Europe join them, thus reinforcing the political weight of the statement.⁵ The first presidential elections in Kazakhstan to have the presence of OSCE observers, was in 2005. At the time, the European Parliament joined the OSCE PA, ODIHR, and PACE in

⁴ ODIHR, <http://www.osce.org/odihr/elections>, Accessed on 20.03.2014.

⁵ Information available at <http://www.oscepa.org/election-observation/election-statements/119-statements/1169-kazakhstan>. Accessed on 04.10.2013.

the assessment of the electoral process. It is also worth mentioning that besides the political weight of these assessments, they still serve a pedagogical function, underscoring the shortcomings of the process as well as the positive developments. When we compare the initial reports with the ones produced as of the 2000s, we see a qualitative shift in this direction. They also tend to be less blunt in their assessment of the elections, meaning that whereas the first reports in the 1990s clearly stated that elections failed to meet OSCE criteria, the latter ones indicate a list of shortcomings and positive developments, but do not make such clear political judgments. One major exception is the last report regarding the 2012 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan. The report reads clearly “[n]otwithstanding the government’s stated ambition to strengthen Kazakhstan’s democratic processes and conduct elections in line with international standards, yesterday’s early parliamentary vote still *did not meet fundamental principles of democratic elections*” (OSCE PA, ODIHR and PACE, 2012: 1, emphasis added). This is to a certain extent a reflection of the disappointment felt within the OSCE with the superficial efforts towards democratic changes made by Kazakhstan leading up to the OSCE Chairmanship in 2010.

The case of Kyrgyzstan has some parallels, although the first election observation mission of the OSCE PA was only deployed in the country in the parliamentary elections of 2000. The first positive assessment of the Kyrgyz elections came in the presidential elections of 2005, in which the European Parliament joined efforts with the OSCE PA and the ODIHR. However, the parliamentary elections of 2007 were assessed as representing “a missed opportunity” for the consolidation of the democratic gains noted in the previous elections (OSCE PA and ODIHR, 2007: 1). Similar shortcomings were noted in the following presidential elections of 2009 (OSCE PA and ODIHR, 2009). Despite the improvements noted in the statement following the parliamentary elections of October 2010, following the political crisis in the country, again in the presidential elections of 2011 a series of shortcomings are noted, raising the issue of whether the assessment of 2010 had been too positive, in order to support the political stabilisation of the country or whether indeed Kyrgyzstan’s steps towards democracy remain fragile. In the case of Tajikistan, only the Presidential elections of 2005 and the Parliamentary elections of 2006 have had OSCE PA observers, having both been assessed as failing to comply with OSCE standards and the commitments undertaken in the 1990 Copenhagen Document (CSCE, 1990a).

The OSCE PA is thus endowed with limited tools for democracy promotion in a region where democracy is mostly unwanted by the leaderships and poorly developed among other constituencies. The membership within the OSCE for the Central Asian countries has been seen as a means to include this region in institutional formats where western countries take part, offering the possibility of influencing events in these countries. The OSCE's rule of consensus at the governmental level has undermined any possibility for more muscular action, but has also kept it as a platform for dialogue across important cultural and political divisions. The role of the OSCE PA in the context of Central Asia has simultaneously dealt with this difficult regional environment and the limitations of parliamentary action within the organisation. The constant struggle for political visibility and acknowledgement by the governmental structures of the OSCE and competition with the ODIHR has marginalised the PA politically. However, it is the low profile of its activities that remains so attractive for countries like the ones in Central Asia. In that sense the PA has sought to maintain avenues of dialogue, even if the contribution to democracy promotion has remained mainly limited to processes of socialisation.

Limitations and opportunities

The OSCE PA suffers from the same problems that other IPIs face. Its fight for relevance and visibility starts at home, within the organisation it is part of. As in any other relations between parliamentary and the executive power, oversight, accountability and limitation of the exercise of power is never accepted without reservations. In the case of the OSCE PA, this is further reinforced by the ad-hoc nature of its relations with the OSCE, and by the political bargaining, in which the participating states engage, at times using the PA as a tool. We have seen this trend very clearly in the context of election observation, in the case of Russia and ODIHR. Formally, the PA has sought ways to influence the political processes within the OSCE, creating unilateral provisions for dialogue with the executive structures and in practice this has established communication lines between the sides. Thus, despite resistance to more formal dependence between the two sides, the practices reveal a more complex picture, where the parliamentary dimension can also be sought as a means to legitimise OSCE decisions and approaches. This is also visible in electoral observation, namely in the invitation directed at the parliamentarians by the OSCE Chairmanship to engage in this area of activity. Thus we see that opportunities for reinforcement of the PA's

position within the organisation exist, and ultimately its credentials as a democratic institution within a consensus-based structure reinforce its legitimacy.

Besides the political weight within the organisation, the PA's relevance depends ultimately on its impact on the ground. Although we chose to look at democracy promotion aspects, conflict prevention and parliamentary diplomacy have been major areas of its work. In fact, we have underlined the link, which the comprehensive security concept of the OSCE establishes between democracy promotion and security. This is explained from the perspective that more accountable governments make for more stable partners. Moreover, institution building, especially in Central Asia, is fundamental to assure regional stability. This was clearly visible in the political crisis in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, when the fragile political structures of the country failed to avoid ethnic clashes from ravaging the country. In this context, the leadership displayed by the OSCE PA can only be seen as a sign of recognition for its work with the region and its engagement with local authorities. Although the issue of legitimisation of non-democratic regimes through engagement can be argued, the focus on democratic socialisation as the main approach to the PA's work fits nicely with this view. In fact, the fact that the Kyrgyz President Rosa Otumbayeva had herself been a parliamentarian at the OSCE PA is not irrelevant to explain why she chose the PA to lead the International Fact Finding Mission to the country. This clearly illustrates the added value of networking and socialisation, at the root of the PA's approach.

Another aspect which is worth underlining regarding the work of the OSCE in Central Asia is the fact that the organisation has kept democracy as a second tier goal. This is due to the perception that the regional context is not favourable to democratic overtures and due to the fact that participating states have other priorities for the region. As mentioned, Esposito and Diaz-Plaja (2012: 400) underline this much when they refer that “[i]n Central Asia [...] other priorities have included human rights institutions, policing, border control, and combating corruption”. They add “[t]here is significantly less ‘knowledge regarding the merits of democracy and the rule of law’ and parliamentary strengthening projects have therefore taken a smaller role in comparison to other dimensions”. We could also add that in a context of Global War on Terror and NATO intervention in Afghanistan, terrorism has become a central aspect of the OSCE's work. This can only make the work of the OSCE PA more relevant, as they, by example alone, continuously promote democratic participation and transformation.

There are ways in which this contribution could be reinforced. These include the reform of the OSCE, through which its formal role in the organisation could be reinforced. Another way is through the development of networks of collaboration with transnational civil society actors, on a political level, since the OSCE does not engage in assistance-related activities. Other forms could be thought of, which could recognise and harness the positive contributions and potential of this IPI in the OSCE space.

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