



# 26

CENTRAL ASIA  
POLICY BRIEFS

THE OSCE IN CENTRAL ASIA:  
VICTIM OF GEOPOLITICS OR  
PROMOTER OF DEMOCRACY?  
A VIEW FROM UZBEKISTAN

*Farkhod Tolipov*

*July  
Bishkek 2015*

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A VIEW FROM UZBEKISTAN

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## KEY POINTS

- Since gaining independence all international activity of Central Asian countries, including OSCE membership has been conducted in the quadruple context: legacy of the Soviet past; nation- and state-building; renaissance of geopolitics; and globalization. Such a context profoundly confused the international self-positioning of these states, especially Uzbekistan as a key country of the region.
- Over the years, the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia have failed to demonstrate explicit, convincing and dynamic democratic process as well as to cope with geopolitical challenge and having fallen into a “micro-geopolitical game” with each other. They also appeared to be not self-sufficient in the field of regional security and the situation has remained in flux.
- The OSCE has been trying to become one of the external “security providers” by offering the countries concerned its well-known three baskets/dimensions of activity – politico-military; economic-ecological; and humanitarian. And while the states of Central Asia acquired OSCE membership, so to speak, by default after the dissolution of the USSR, this membership became an existential challenge for both the organization and these countries. In large due to the fact that the OSCE still doesn’t have a long-term strategy in the region and its activity contrasts with the activity of such organizations as the CSTO and SCO.
- Years of OSCE engagement with the region have provided both sides – the Organization and the newly independent states – with important experience. Compliance of the Central Asian participating states with OSCE standards and their commitment to its norms and values has been an essential challenge for these countries. But this was a period of serious constitutional,

structural and functional challenges for the OSCE as well.

- Nowadays the OSCE doesn't enjoy a favorable attitude in the region. The Organization has been criticized by recipient states for its inefficiency and over focusing on "monitoring the situation in the sphere of human rights and democratic institutions". There is also a wide spread perception and conviction that international organizations like the OSCE are in fact promoters of an American geopolitical agenda.
- Not to fall hostage of the regional securitization game the OSCE should be more "aggressive" in promoting its standards, norms and values to all its members. Security must be defined, understood and accepted equally and identically by all participating states without tricky modification of the term adapted to local geographical and historical conditions and to such mythic and shadow substance as mentality of the local population to which authoritarian leaders always appeal to justify non-democratic political practice. Reaching out to the civil society should be one of the priorities of the organization. Due to the strong emphasis put on human security, democracy and human rights, strong human, that is, non-governmental representation on the overall OSCE agenda is the demand of our time.

# THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT OF ACCESSION

The countries of Central Asia acquired OSCE membership, so to speak, by default immediately after the collapse of the former USSR. That membership became an existential challenge for both the Organization and these countries. The OSCE embraced a number of Muslim nations whose initial after-independence, post-Soviet democratic choice was precarious. That was a very novel situation for the Organization's very design and international prestige. The accession of newly independent states to this very specific forum coincided with the so-called "end of history" and proliferation of democracies across the world.

Uzbekistan became a member of the then CSCE on 26 February 1992, and its representation was opened in Vienna in 1994. The OSCE Liaison Office for Central Asia was opened in October 1995 in Tashkent. Afterwards, missions of the Organization were opened in other countries of the region (in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan by 1999 and Tajikistan yet in 1994). Therefore, the mission in Tashkent was renamed into OSCE Centre in Tashkent.

It has to be argued that the Central Asian countries' membership in the OSCE just like other forms of their international activities since gaining independence has been conducted in quadruple contexts: legacy of the Soviet past; nation- and state-building; renaissance of geopolitics; and globalization. The first context brought with it what I call 'Soviet syndrome'; the second caused sovereign euphoria; the third necessitated implicit and explicit struggle for survival and prestige; and the fourth required adaptation. Such a quadruple context profoundly confused the international self-positioning of the five Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan – the most populous country of Central Asia whose role in the regional affairs might have been crucial and decisive.

The current security environment in Central Asia is in flux. The most characteristic feature of Central Asia is that the region appeared to be not self-sufficient in this field, and external “security providers” proliferate in this part of the world. We have in the region the UN with a number of its specialized agencies, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), NATO, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building in Asia (CICA) and others. Multiplicity of such diverse organizations often with incompatible agenda which engage Central Asian states reflects the shift in international relations from a realist multipolar vision to more a pluralist multilateral one. This, in turn, has caused eclectic choices and eclectic policies of these states. The OSCE as one of such security providers has tried to occupy its firm niche in the emerging regional security architecture by offering the countries concerned its well-known three baskets/dimensions of activity – politico-military; economic-ecological; and humanitarian.

In the case of Uzbekistan, initially, cooperation of this country with the OSCE was quite successful and much promising. A number of important projects were supported and administered by the OSCE Centre in Tashkent and covered by all three dimensions of the Organization’s mission. Those projects were accomplished in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Oliy Majlis (parliament), Border Guards, Custom Committee, political parties, NGOs and others. The Mission endeavored to reach out to the civil society. For the first time the text of the Helsinki Final Act was translated into Uzbek language and disseminated among universities and other relevant institutions.

However, the OSCE’s very ambitious agenda contrasted with people’s unawareness of the Organization as an institution and a process, as well as with officialdom’s reluctance to engage with it.

# GEOPOLITICAL AND AUTHORITARIAN TRAP

Over time, 'democratic euphoria' in these countries has faded away. The old geopolitics got new breath in the region and overshadowed democratic processes. Democracy turned from unconditional choice of the newly independent states into conditional perspective.<sup>1</sup> Since 2004 all authoritarian regimes of the former Soviet republics have lived under the phantasm of the so-called 'color revolutions'. Social unrests in Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004 and in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 with concomitant overthrow of presidents and governments of these countries convinced political elites of the existence of the alleged American/Western plot against them. The flash of terrorist threat in the Uzbek city of Andijan in May 2005 caused the same suspicion in the Uzbek leadership. So, 'color revolution' attempts became the matter of national security. The securitization of 'color revolutions' resulted in the widening of the gap between the OSCE and Central Asian countries with Uzbekistan being the most illustrative case in this respect, where democracy and democratization as a political project and social practice experienced regressive metamorphosis.

Democracy in Uzbekistan is, actually, what the government and President make of it. It is a topic that can only be openly discussed either by officials or a special group of "experts" who can be authorized to talk only about issues approved from the top. This phenomenon can be called 'licensed democracy'. The latter represents by itself a system of filtration and infiltration: on the one hand, it allows speeches on, discussions and interpretation of democracy which do not challenge the existing political regime (filtration), and, on the other hand, indoctrinates the public opinion and civil society with what is called a national model of democracy

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1 Толипов, Ф., Универсальная демократия, национальная демократия или просвещенный авторитаризм? – Центральная Азия и Кавказ, №2, 2007 pp. 7-19.

(infiltration). It has to be noted that such a situation is characteristic to all post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, which believe they are exposed to the 'color revolution' threat. The OSCE mission in Tashkent has faced the same regulation: before talking of democracy and carrying out certain democratic projects it has to get a special "license", a permission from the MFA. This is underlined by the fact that the OSCE does not have a full-fledged centre in Tashkent, only a so-called project coordinator.

It is noticeable nowadays that the OSCE doesn't enjoy a favorable attitude on the part of the countries of the post-Soviet space. The 9 July 2004 Joint Statement of a number of CIS member-states disseminated in the Permanent Council of the OSCE in Vienna was symptomatic in this regard. The statement pointed out that the Organization is inefficient and "couldn't adapt to demands of the changing world". Especially, the "field missions" of the Organization were evaluated negatively for allegedly concentrating predominantly on "monitoring the situation in the sphere of human rights and democratic institutions". Moreover, the statement said field missions' chiefs allow unjustified criticism towards internal policies of the governments in the recipient countries.<sup>2</sup>

Russia was an initiator of that unprecedented document. The countries that joined Russia in that demarche against the OSCE were and still are the ones which achieved very little success in democratization and demonstrated much "success" in the abuse of human rights. Central Asian countries having been exposed to the western criticism for their non-democratic practices and non-compliance with the OSCE standards decided to exercise ad hoc "protective integration" with Russia – a form of collective political solidarity with Russia and China "against international political processes or agendas that are interpreted as challenging politically incumbent regimes and their

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2 Лукьянов Ф., Заключительный акт. Страны СНГ приговорили ОБСЕ – Газета "Время новостей", 10.07.2004 <http://www.vremya.ru/2004/119/5/102484.html>

leaders”.<sup>3</sup> There is a wide spread perception and conviction that international organizations like the OSCE are in fact promoters of an American geopolitical agenda.

In the aftermath of securitization of the issue of democracy the OSCE Centre in Tashkent was renamed into the OSCE Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan and thereby its status was significantly reduced. When the mission had a status of an OSCE Centre in Tashkent it was quite an independent and efficient office in terms of conducting various projects and supporting NGOs. Now the Project Coordinator has to receive permission to all its projects from the MFA, which in turn arbitrarily can approve some projects and disapprove others. So the diminishing of the OSCE’s profile in Uzbekistan was undoubtedly politically motivated and symbolized the explicit retreat from the democratic choice of early years of independence.

Nowadays, the OSCE field mission in Uzbekistan is limited to a number of small projects such as contacting the parliament and the ombudsman, conducting seminars and trainings on human trafficking, money laundering, drug trafficking and control of narcotics, energy security and renewable energy, civil society issues, justice reform, rural development, women empowerment, designing new biometric passports and the like. In 2013 the OSCE Project Coordinator in Uzbekistan launched an important project on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 on the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>4</sup> A special project was accomplished in 2007-2011 on “Assistance in improvement of staff training system for law enforcement bodies at the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Uzbekistan”.

However, Tashkent is getting more and more cautious and self-restrained on the international arena. It happened at the December 2010 OSCE summit in Astana that Uzbekistan officially proclaimed paradoxical shift in its foreign policy,

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3 Allison, R., Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia, in Central Asian Survey, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2008, pp. 185-186.  
4 OSCE Annual Report 2013.Vienna, OSCE Secretariat, pp. 82-83.

namely: the adoption of the principle of bilateralism and refraining from multilateral formats.<sup>5</sup> Armed with such a principle, the country can only keep low profile and nominal membership in any international organization and vice versa: international organizations can only have a low profile, if any, in Uzbekistan. The telling illustration of Uzbekistan's ambivalent and cautious international behavior is its failed membership in four structures – the CSTO, GUUAM, EAEC (Euro-Asian Economic Community - EvrAzES) and CACO (Central Asian Cooperation Organization). Using the theoretical language such international behavior can be described in terms of 'heavy realism': it is obviously based on the realist paradigm that appeared to be heavy conceptual burden which in turn stipulated Tashkent's self-isolationist foreign policy.

Meanwhile, it became obvious that responsibilities of Central Asian states taken within the OSCE are not always in concord with those taken within other competitive organizations such as the SCO and CSTO and with political regimes' interests. The situation further complicated the vision of the role of the OSCE in the region. This situation reflects again the geopolitical dimension ascribed to such international organizations. In particular, the Shanghai-5/SCO has since its inception in 1996 evolved as an implicitly anti-Western forum. So with their simultaneous membership in two such multilateral formats based on different value foundations, Central Asian states just put themselves in ideologically and geopolitically awkward position. In a broader perspective, they find themselves between Euro-Asian and Euro-Atlantic security architectures.<sup>6</sup> And it is not simply about geographical division, it is more about values gap and the different understanding of the very concept of security. In terms of values, for instance, the Eurasian

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5 Tolipov, F., Uzbekistan's new foreign policy concept: no base, no blocks but national interests first, in the 09/05/2012 issue of the CACI Analyst <http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5829>

6 Tolipov, F., "Central Asia between the Euro-Atlantic and Euro-Asia: Security Services Market in the Region", in International Research. Society. Politics. Economics, 2013, No. 3/4, pp. 58-67.

security outlook is more state-centric, whereas the Euro-Atlantic worldview is more human-centric. By and large, I think, any contemplation on the OSCE's or other security organization's role wherever in the world, should be based on the ontological aspect of the concept of security.

One of the dominant trends in contemporary security studies is reflected in extending security into four strands. "The first involves the extension of security from the security of nations to the security of groups and individuals: it is extended downwards from nations to individuals. In the second, it is extended... upwards, from the nation to the biosphere... In the third operation it is extended horizontally, or to the sort of security that are in question... the concept of security is extended, therefore, from military to political, economic, social, environmental, or "human" security... In a fourth operation, the political responsibility for ensuring security... is diffused in all directions from national states, including upwards to international institutions, downwards to regional or local government, and sideways to non-governmental organizations, to public opinion and the press, and to the abstract forces of nature or of the market."<sup>7</sup>

So, defining the tokens and conditions of security and insecurity is crucial for further progress in what is called above a 'security provider's' mission. The OSCE adopted the comprehensive approach to security reflected in three dimensions – politico-military, economic-ecological, and human. The Helsinki Final Act and a number of subsequent documents of the Organization such as Documents of the Vienna, Copenhagen and Moscow Meetings on the CSCE human dimension proclaimed that member-states stressed that issues related to human rights, basic freedoms, democracy and supremacy of law bear international character since the execution of these freedoms and rights constitutes a foundation of international law. They categorically and

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7 Rothschild, Emma, "What is Security?" *Daedalus* 124, No. 3 (1995); pp. 53-98. Quoted in: Ken Booth, *Beyond Critical Security Studies*, in "Critical Security Studies and World Politics", edited by Ken Booth (New Delhi, Kolkata: Viva Books, 2005), p. 55.

irrevocably stated that obligations they had taken in the sphere of human dimension of the CSCE are issues of direct and rightful interest for all participating states and do not belong to internal affairs of the respective state. States of Central Asia subscribed to such new international order.

24 years ago the former Soviet republics not merely became independent *de jure* but also suddenly became involved in different, and novel for them, forms of multilateral interactions *de facto*. It has to be mentioned that some of them have experienced dramatic turn of events in the process of their international 'subjectivation'. Almost ten years ago one scholar wrote: "The collapse of bipolarity did not release potentials for greater communicative action from the constraints of superpower rivalry but unleashed new and more violent forms of strategic action spearheaded by aggressively nationalistic movements in various parts of the former socialist bloc".<sup>8</sup> The war in Ukraine today and a number of recent deadly conflicts which have taken place in the former Soviet space fully testify this thesis. Central Asia is not an exception for such a scenario.

Unfortunately, throughout the post-Soviet period, authoritarian regimes of Central Asia have failed to demonstrate explicit, convincing and dynamic democratic process as well as to cope with geopolitical challenge having fallen into a "micro-geopolitical game" with each other. They couldn't avoid explicit and implicit conflicts and tensions in their regional relationships.

In June 2010 deadly interethnic clash occurred in the city of Osh in Kyrgyzstan between the local Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities; it happened during Kazakhstan's Chairmanship of the OSCE. However, the Organization failed to address the tragedy in Osh. The Astana summit declaration adopted in December 2010 didn't even mention the situation in Kyrgyzstan and the massacre which occurred

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8 Linklater, A., *Political Community and Human Security in "Critical Security Studies and World Politics"* (New Delhi: Viva Books Ltd., 2005), p. 117.

there.<sup>9</sup> This is just one example among other failures of the Organization to cope with the serious source of insecurity in its zone of responsibility that requires revising the modalities of its mission in Central Asia.

## REVISING THE OSCE'S MISSION IN CENTRAL ASIA

What can be the OSCE's 'added value' for Central Asia in these conditions? How can its profile rise in this region? My analysis of this question takes into account above all that by the fact of historical accession to the OSCE the non-democratic states of the region encountered a normative challenge within a multilateral forum. More than that, it has to be noted, the OSCE's activity in the region contrasts the activity of the CSTO and SCO just in this normative realm. Indeed, for example, Russia and Russia-led CSTO have distinct perspective on how the Eurasian security architecture should be constructed. From an European perspective, the unacceptability of a new division of the OSCE space into different spheres in terms of values and commitments is clear, while from the Russian side the current effort is more often described as a way to increase trust and predictability between two interlinked but still separate processes of East-West integration. What other Eastern countries in Central Asia and in the Caucasus, etc., think about all this is not altogether clear.<sup>10</sup>

For many years the OSCE has conducted a number of projects. However, it still doesn't have a long-term strategy in the region. It seems that the Organization still lacks a

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9 The Final Declaration of the OSCE Astana Summit and the Interpretative Statements attached to it by a number of countries can testify that failure. See: [http://www.osce.org/search/apachesolr\\_search/Declaration%20Astana%20Summit](http://www.osce.org/search/apachesolr_search/Declaration%20Astana%20Summit)

10 Lundin, L.-E. and van Kaathoven, K., Deciphering the Security Community Debate, in the ISDP Policy Brief, No. 107, November 30, 2012. See: [www.isdp.eu](http://www.isdp.eu)

strong conceptual approach to the countries of Central Asia based on the main questions reflected in the name of the OSCE, that is, security and cooperation. The matter is, the OSCE missions in Central Asia were created in the general post-Soviet context which stipulated initial perceptions of these countries as immanently weak and conflict-prone. Today, these countries are a little stronger but even more conflict-prone.

It has to be mentioned that in the very beginning of the OSCE's activity in Central Asia, the principle of regionalism a priori was envisaged as an important component. In particular, the charters and mandates of each Central Asian mission included the provision on supporting regional cooperation.<sup>11</sup>

However, despite the acknowledgement of regionalism in Central Asia, the national approach has prevailed up to now. At the same time, Central Asian states themselves with their obsession with nationalism and sovereignty have frozen regional integration processes and therefore, so to speak, "nationalized" the OSCE's overall activities in their territories. To any attempt at active engagement with the countries concerned, especially when it comes to human rights and democratic reforms, they reserved a trump – the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of the sovereign state, perhaps the only provision of international law which they respect most of all and also want their partners to respect most of all.

We should add to all this profound unawareness of the overall OSCE system among the citizens, particularly in Uzbekistan. Indeed, speaking ironically, how can the OSCE require from the state full compliance with its standards, norms and values whereas the majority of this state's citizens remain ignorant of those standards, norms and values.

In such quite complicated and more often than not relatively unfavorable conditions the OSCE faces in Central Asia it has

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11 See: <http://www.osce.org/publications>

to find somehow a new *modus operandi*, which would meet the new challenges of the rapidly changing world order. The overall analysis of this issue should take into account threefold peculiarities or pillars of any international organization such as: 1) constitutional (conceptual or doctrinal); 2) structural (composition); 3) functional (operational).<sup>12</sup>

On the constitutional level we see values gap between the Western world on the one hand, and Russia and the Central Asian countries on the other. Therefore, normative work in the family of the OSCE nations has to be permanently performed if we want to save this very unique organization, especially given the context of ongoing dramatic post-Soviet transformations. The OSCE should be more “aggressive” in a sense that its standards, norms and values are embodied by all its members, be they democratically advanced European countries or Central Asian underdeveloped democracies. Security must be defined, understood and accepted equally and identically by all member-countries without modification of the term adapted to local geographical and historical conditions and to such mythic and shadow substance as mentality of the local population to which authoritarian leaders always appeal to justify non-democratic political practice.

On the structural level the most serious problem is the prevalence of national interests of sovereign states over common interests within the organization. The strategic culture and “fundamentalism of sovereignty” make the sovereign states pursue what is called ‘the national interest’

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12 The constitutional pillar means a set of principles, norms, values, standards, and goals which constitute the foundation and nature of the organization. This aspect is reflected in charters, programmes and other basic documents of the organization. It is all about the ideology of the organization.  
The structural pillar reflects a specific disposition of membership and associations composing the group. This aspect reflects also interests, consistency and changeability in postures of members and associates within the organization.  
The functional pillar demonstrates the workability of the organization in all its manifestations. This aspect shows the degree of its efficiency, usefulness, popularity, reputation and its capacity.

by all possible means. This is very typical to the so-called newly independent states which gained, so to speak, “freedom of national interests” in 1991. In result, the actuality of and appeal to multilateral formats in addressing contemporary challenges the world is facing coincided with actuality of and appeal to nationalism in the newly independent states of Central Asia. So, international organizations with their international agendas encountered the motion of Central Asian nations in the opposite direction. These countries’ national agendas have not yet been fully satisfied, but they are forced by contemporary international reality to satisfy international (and regional) agendas.

On the functional level the effectiveness of the organization obviously depends on how its field mission is met and accepted by the host country. The OSCE might establish strong permanent offices/missions in all participating States – both developed and weak ones. When it comes to Central Asia, giving more authority to the OSCE in the region is very expedient. Particularly, the previous status of the mission in Uzbekistan which was called the “OSCE Centre in Tashkent” should be restored. Reforming the OSCE missions in the region should go in parallel with general reform of the organization in Vienna.

One of the fundamental innovations which the organization needs, in my opinion, could be achieving more input from civil society and NGOs into the OSCE’s activity. This unique intergovernmental organization needs to be supplemented by what can be called ‘non-governmental OSCE’. Albeit diplomatic and formal, the OSCE has a very important normative and human dimension. Therefore, its heavy dependence on the sovereign states preoccupied with national interests can be and should be balanced somehow with some sort of informal, non-governmental, human representation on all its levels.



## CONCLUSIONS

24 years of engagement of Central Asian countries with the OSCE have provided both sides – the Organization and the newly independent states – with important experience. Compliance of the Central Asian participating States with OSCE standards and their commitment to its norms and values has been an essential challenge for these countries with some variation. But this was a period of a serious constitutional, structural and functional challenge for the OSCE as well. The main lesson to be drawn from that experience is that this unique international organization needs to find new instruments to perform more “aggressive”, friendly and principled policy in its huge zone of responsibility.

An important work has to be done, above all, on what I call classification of security threats to the participating States. OSCE embraces two vast spaces – the Euro-Atlantic and the Eurasian group of countries. These two spaces, erstwhile geopolitically divided, are united now under its common OSCE security umbrella. If security of these spaces are really inter-related and if participating States really subscribed to the political, value and legal foundation of the OSCE, then the Organization should proceed further in its activity, beyond the frameworks outlined by national interests and sovereignty of the participating States. We always use the term ‘participating States’ but do not talk about participating peoples.

It should not seek for a special “license”, as in the case of Uzbekistan, to promote its standards and values and to conduct its projects. Instead, the OSCE needs a certain enforcement mechanism which probably will require the revision of the consensus principle of the decision-making process in Vienna.

Finally, reaching out more than ever to the civil society should be one of the priorities of the organization. Due to the strong emphasis put on human security, democracy and

human rights, strong human, that is, non-governmental – from demos – representation in the overall OSCE agenda is the demand of our time. The conditions are certainly not favorable now. However, the OSCE has demonstrated its ability to adjust to changing circumstances many times.



