

Trust and Realpolitik: The OSCE in 2016

Germany takes over the OSCE Chairmanship at a critical juncture in European security. Illusions of quick fixes to the deep strategic confrontation between Russia and the West should be avoided, but opportunities for practical confidence-building measures need to be seized.

by Petri Hakkarainen and Christian Nünlist

Since 2014 and the start of the Ukraine Crisis, European security has been increasingly undermined by a confrontation between Russia and the West. In addition to their collision on security issues, the fundamental differences in the values and governance systems that Moscow and the West represent have become more visible. For the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the year 2016 thus begins with mixed emotions. On the one hand, as the very concept of cooperative security is under severe pressure, the day-to-day work of the OSCE has become all the more cumbersome. On the other hand, it is precisely the OSCE that remains a beacon of hope for European security. Paradoxically, just as the OSCE is the first to suffer from the widening gap between positions and the ensuing deadlock on many fronts in Vienna, the same conflict has given the organization more weight than for a long time. Through the central role it has played in de-escalating the Ukraine Crisis as the only independent security organization on the ground, the OSCE is firmly back in business.

The comprehensive and inclusive approach of the OSCE is particularly valuable in difficult times. Its format allows for a dialogue with Russia despite the presently strained relationship. In addition, it also holds promises for sustainable solutions to many of the most serious transnational challenges of the day

– such as violent extremism and irregular migration. So far, however, this potential has been largely untapped.

Enter Germany

In these circumstances, it was a bold move from Germany to assume the OSCE Chairmanship for 2016. Expectations are high. Having taken on the task, the leading European power cannot afford to fail at the helm of the organization during the next 12 months. Yet, although Germany has decided to invest a sizeable amount of political capital

KEY POINTS

- In 2016, Germany will not be able to solve the deep strategic confrontation between Moscow and the West. Instead, it should focus on small practical steps to rebuild trust and confidence.
- The success of Germany's chairmanship will to a large extent depend on its influence outside the OSCE framework – maintaining unity within NATO and the EU in 2016 will be crucial.
- Within the OSCE, Berlin should seek a balance between informal, confidential high-level meetings and open, inclusive Track 2 diplomacy to facilitate a constructive dialogue.
- Taking small steps towards a new modus vivendi must not mean renegotiating OSCE principles. These principles and values are not “Western”, but universally agreed foundations of European security.

to “strengthen dialogue, trust and, security” in the OSCE region in 2016, no miracles should be awaited from Berlin.¹

Ideally, German ambitions for its OSCE Chairmanship should be guided by a wise balance between strategic patience and small constructive steps. As far as patience is concerned, it is essential to acknowledge that in 2016 Germany will not be able to solve the overarching, comprehensive strategic conflict between Russia and the West. If there are temptations to rush into hasty deals papering over fundamental differences, they should be resisted. Instead, the main strategic focus needs to be on avoiding further escalation both in Ukraine and elsewhere, perhaps most urgently in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Staying firm on the big picture does not, however, exclude seizing opportunities for practical small steps where possible. On the contrary, building “cooperative islands” in a stormy international sea is exactly what is required to enhance European security in the long term – and this can be done without going soft on vital principles. Cleverly chosen concrete measures can defuse immediate escalation potential as well as incrementally rebuild confidence in the OSCE space.

Defusing Conflicts Outside the Vienna Agenda

Of course, no OSCE chair can either foresee or control all the developments that will unfold during its term in office. Unexpected events both inside and outside the OSCE region will most certainly rock the boat in 2016, too. And a number of international issues that can already now be seen lurking around the corner make the German task rather difficult. Yet Germany also carries exceptional authority to deal with some of these potential spoilers. A successful chairmanship of the OSCE requires qualities of an honest broker, but Germany will not cease to be a leading member of NATO and the EU and a key player in several ad-hoc negotiating formats in 2016.

In the most obvious challenge to the OSCE region, the crisis in and around Ukraine, Germany is well placed to exert its influence. It is valuable to have the OSCE chaired by one of the four members of the so-called Normandy group (Ukraine, Russia, Germany, France). The situation on the ground remains volatile and unpredictable, but Germany’s double role in the Normandy format and in the OSCE can be a stabilizing factor.

Several challenges within the West will further complicate discussions on European security. The cohesion of the EU is tested by the persistent economic and Eurozone crises, the impending referendum on the future of Britain in the EU, the continuing influx of refugees, and the rise of populism challenging established political parties across the continent. NATO, for its part, is gearing up



German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier delivers a speech during the closing session of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Belgrade, 4 December 2015. *OSCE / Jonathan Perfect*

for its Warsaw summit in July in a tense atmosphere. If the outcome of the NATO summit adds to escalating the tension between Russia and the West, this would simultaneously be detrimental to the German OSCE Chairmanship.

Ironically, then, much of the essential legwork of German diplomacy for its OSCE Chairmanship actually needs to be done outside Vienna and outside the OSCE agenda. Maintaining unity in the EU will be crucial, and the results will also be visible in the future of the economic sanctions imposed on Russia. Equally important will be Germany’s ability to shape NATO’s common agenda for the Warsaw summit. Finding the (understandably required) means for reassuring members of the Alliance of their security without unnecessarily building up counter-productive confrontation in NATO-Russia relations is essential for European security on the whole.

Informal Dialogue and Track 2 Diplomacy

In addition to the very real battle lines in Ukraine, the deep political confrontation about European security manifests itself rhetorically in the OSCE. Ostensibly, the December 2015 OSCE Ministerial Council in Belgrade was symptomatic of this intensifying war of words.² The official statements of ministers rather bleakly revealed the present situation: there is no longer any consensus on strategic issues of European security. In such an atmosphere, no comprehensive OSCE political declaration was possible.

The inability of the OSCE to agree on an overall political declaration is not a novelty as such, but the rapidly widening gap between positions is dangerous, as it comes with concrete repercussions. Often, as witnessed in Belgrade, public high-level plenaries only exacerbate the divisions, leading to a clash of propagandistic prepared statements without real interaction. Closing the rhetorical gap will require political commitment at the highest levels, but the most productive means for achieving that may be found

behind the scenes. Indeed, according to some insiders, the rare silver lining in Belgrade was an informal lunch of the foreign ministers. Apparently, the most open and constructive discussion of the meeting took place when the results of the Panel of Eminent Persons were debated in a non-public format restricted to ministers only.

Germany should do its best to capitalize on this potential. Whether the format includes ministers, senior officials from capitals, or ambassadors in Vienna, informal high-level meetings should be encouraged as much and as often as possible to continue a confidential dialogue aiming at bridging the gap.

Some major bones of contention plaguing the OSCE, then again, might actually benefit from more openness and inclusiveness. In parallel to focusing on informal high-level meetings in certain areas, Germany could also use its OSCE Chairmanship to facilitate Track 1.5 or Track 2 diplomacy in carefully chosen fields, harnessing the capacity of think-tanks and research institutions for a common cause. One obvious example concerns the impact of history on the present. In November 2015, the final report of the Panel of Eminent Persons underscored the dramatic difference in respective historical narratives about the past 25 years in Russia and in the West.³ Getting the OSCE practitioners bogged down in debates about historical revisionism is hardly a fruitful way forward. Instead, an OSCE-wide Track 2 approach to defusing tensions stemming from historical interpretations might prove helpful.⁴

Cooperative Islands to Create Trust

Beyond keeping lines of communication open, the German Chairmanship should focus on small, concrete steps to begin improving the confrontational atmosphere and to create mutual trust. Five areas seem particularly well-suited to create these “cooperative islands”.

First, the need to counter radicalization and violent extremism is one of the rare issues on which all OSCE participating states can agree at the moment, as witnessed by the respective declarations in Belgrade. This momentum should be built on in 2016 to increase cooperation in counterterrorism efforts in the OSCE area.⁵ Enhancing the OSCE’s ability to adapt to these new realities would be beneficial in its own right, but advances here could ideally also spill over to more cooperative approaches in other fields.

Second, in the politico-military dimension the fate of the proposed High-Level Military Doctrine Seminar in February 2016, the first one in five years, is an important test case. As during the Cold War, securing a genuinely high participation level can as such already be counted as a

FURTHER READING

The Evolution of Russia’s OSCE Policy: From the Promises of the Helsinki Act to the Ukraine Crisis *Elena Kropatcheva (Journal of Contemporary European Studies, vol. 23/1, 2015)*

A critical look at important turning points in Russia’s perception of the OSCE, including Western neglect of Russian reform proposals of the early 1990s and the Western military intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Conventional Arms Control in Europe: New Approaches in Challenging Times *Wolfgang Zellner (CORE Working Paper 26, 2015)*

Based on an international workshop held in Berlin in April 2015, leading experts analyze the current deadlock in conventional arms control (CAC) in Europe and come up with innovative new ideas. Also discussed is the link between CAC and crisis management.

Anatomy of Mistrust: U.S.-Soviet Relations during the Cold War *Deborah Welch Larson (Cornell University Press, 1997)*

Although the current situation differs from the Cold War, this book on missed opportunities for mitigating the East-West confrontation provides valuable insights on how to build trust in a hostile climate.

small confidence-building measure. A successful doctrine seminar would help Germany in its difficult task to push through the periodic revision of the Vienna Document on Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) later on in the year – a bellwether for any hopes to restart a strategic dialogue with Moscow in the more distant future.

Third, so-called “incident prevention mechanisms” have gained new urgency due to an intensification of military exercises, near misses related to airspace violations, and an increasingly loose talk about the use of nuclear weapons. Well-tried mechanisms need to be re-introduced and updated to meet current demands. CSBMs such as reinforcing reliable systems for mutual notification in the event of emergencies and exercises near borders would help reduce the risk of unintended military escalation.

Fourth, the German-Swiss idea of status-neutral arms control (or verification) is a promising concept.⁶ Based on the positive experiences made with status-neutral formulae in Kosovo after independence (UNMIK and EULEX) and in the Russia-Georgia WTO deal of 2011, status-neutral elements could also help stabilize other territorial conflicts. A new idea would be to establish an independent verification unit in the OSCE Secretariat to act on behalf of the OSCE Secretary General – and thus avoid difficult status questions for individual OSCE participating states. However, status-neutral elements can only be successful if both conflict parties agree to such an approach.

Fifth, the concept of CBMs should not be limited to military security alone. The OSCE region is badly in

need of rebuilding lost trust in a much broader definition of the term. This applies to people-to-people contacts especially in territorial conflicts, to the notion of “economic connectivity”⁷ despite the obvious difficulties in an era of sanctions, as well as to the entire human dimension of the OSCE. Placing a special focus on the human dimension is one of the stated priorities of the German Chairmanship. Given that not a single agreement emerged from among the dozen-plus proposals in this dimension in Belgrade, it will be an uphill struggle. Still, Germany should try to find opportunities for small constructive steps together with Finland, the chair of the Human Dimension Committee of the OSCE in 2016.

A New Modus Vivendi

The present crisis in European security is so severe that it will not be solved overnight. Whereas major strategic breakthroughs are not on the cards in 2016, for the OSCE itself a focus on small steps to improve European security is actually quite suitable. In fact, the history of the OSCE as an inclusive, consensus-based dialogue forum makes it well-equipped to gradually create a basis for a new modus vivendi despite deep ideological and political divisions. This is the way in which the Helsinki Process of the 1970s and 1980s can indeed serve as a model. If pragmatic confidence-building measures and an open dialogue on diverging threat perceptions and conflicting interests were possible at the height of the Cold War confrontation, they should not be impossible now, either.⁸

Striving for a new modus vivendi and trying to re-establish lost trust does not, however, mean that OSCE principles should be renegotiated or their breach accepted. This would be a false lesson to be drawn from the prehistory of the OSCE and fatal for European security. Quite on the contrary, the West should confidently emphasize that the principles and values agreed upon in Helsinki, Paris, Istanbul, and Astana from 1975 to 2010 in fact are not Western principles and values, as often criticized by Russia and some likeminded states. They are universal principles and values, which the East and the West jointly agreed upon for the entire OSCE space from Vancouver to Vladivostok in a decade-long negotiating marathon.

Engaging all participating states in an open discussion without compromising on these foundations of European security will require a lot of stamina, patience, and self-confidence. All of these qualities are to be expected from the German Chairmanship. We may have a different kind of marathon ahead of us, and 2016 is a good year to start it.

SELECTED SOURCES

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2. See Christian Nünlist, “[In Switzerland’s Shadow: Summing up Serbia’s 2015 OSCE Chairmanship](#)”, in: *Security and Human Rights Blog* (11 December 2015).
3. “[Back to Diplomacy](#)”, Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project (November 2015).
4. A natural partner in this regard would be the [OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions](#). For the link between the past and the present, see also the joint [History and Policymaking Initiative](#) of the GCSP and the Graduate Institute in Geneva.
5. Owen Frazer / Christian Nünlist, “[The Concept of Countering Violent Extremism](#)”, in: *CSS Analyses on Security Policy* no. 183 (2015).
6. Daniel Möckli, “[The OSCE and Conventional Arms Control in Europe: Towards a Double Relaunch](#)”, in: *ISN Blog* (17 September 2012).
7. This concept was introduced by the Swiss Chairmanship in 2014. See Didier Burkhalter, “[More Economic and Environmental Cooperation for More Security in Europe](#)”, Prague, 10 September 2014.
8. Jaakko Iloniemi, “[Not Just Another Tea Party: The Lasting Value of the OSCE](#)”, in: *FIIA Finnish Foreign Policy Papers* 4 (December 2015).

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<http://www.css.ethz.ch>

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