

The OSCE and EU

The OSCE maintains Centres in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), Astana (Kazakhstan), and Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) as well as an office in Tajikistan and a project coordinator in Uzbekistan. The OSCE also runs an Academy in Bishkek that offers a Master's program in political science for students from Central Asia. In 2009 it opened a Border Management Staff College in Dushanbe (Tajikistan), although this is still in its start-up phase and there have been obstacles to training personnel from Afghanistan, a key goal.

Although some are relatively small, the OSCE's field presences have very broad mandates, ranging from environmental affairs to security projects. The latter include assistance on counter-terrorism issues, support to police reform and more practical issues such as helping secure ammunition from the Soviet era. In a region where human rights problems are common, the OSCE's field presences are largely confined to indirect efforts to promote rights norms. These include holding events with civil society and governments, and commenting on draft legislation. The OSCE presences in Central Asia do not monitor the administration of justice directly, unlike its missions in the Balkans and Caucasus.

The region's governments are typically skeptical about any greater OSCE intervention in their internal affairs. However, the organization's relevance to the region was brought to the fore in 2010 with the Kyrgyz crisis, in part because Kazakhstan held the OSCE's presidency (the first Central Asian state to do so). The Centre in Bishkek had been conscious of the threat of violence towards the Uzbek minority, having opened a field office in Osh – the epicenter of this year's violence – in 2000. The field office, with four international staff, had focused on improving cross-border contacts to reduce tensions.

When the initial Kyrgyz political crisis broke in April 2010, the Kazakh Chairman-in-Office's special envoy, Kanat Saudabayev, took a prominent role in mediating the transition to the new government. In June, the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities, Knut Vollebaek, urged the organization's Permanent Council to act on the rapidly increasing inter-ethnic violence in Osh and its region. In July, the Permanent Council agreed to deploy a Police Advisory Group (PAG) to reassure the public and "strengthen the capacities of the police and help in restoring public trust." The PAG – initially mandated to deploy 52 police personnel for a four-month period – was approved "within the mandate" of the Centre in Bishkek.

The PAG has its own head - Markus Mueller, a Swiss diplomat who ran the Centre from 2003-2008. The mission's imminent arrival sparked protests from Kyrgyz groups concerned that it would foster Uzbek separatism. Efforts to agree a memorandum of understanding with the government on the PAG's remit were delayed through August. NGOs such as the International Crisis Group have called for a much larger international presence in Kyrgyzstan, although this remains unlikely at present.

In September, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) opened an election observation mission for the October parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan. The mission that was deployed following an invitation from the Kyrgyz government comprises 17 experts based in Bishkek and 22 long-term observers, who are deployed throughout the country. Immediately prior to election day the mission will be joined by 300 additional short-term observers.

The OSCE's diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan has been coordinated not only with the UN but also the EU, which has had an EUSR for Central Asia since 2005. The first holder of this office was Slovakia's Jan Kubis, who was replaced in 2006 by Pierre Morel, a French diplomat. The EUSR's mandate places a particular emphasis on energy security in the region. However, his leverage is limited by a very small support team – primarily based in Brussels – and the lack of a strong EU consensus on Central Asian affairs. Suggestions that the EU might deploy an operation to Kyrgyzstan this year did not get far. The post of EUSR for Central Asia is not one of those to be terminated in 2011, reflecting the strategic sensitivity and uncertainty of the region.