

Special Representative

To:

PA President

and

PA Secretary General

PC Brief Spring 2020

The reaction of the OSCE to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic went through three phases. For a brief period, there was an almost total standstill in the activities of delegations, followed by the resumption of meetings, including of the Permanent Council (PC) and the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC), as well as some conferences, such as the Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC) - all of which took place virtually. Currently, meetings take place in the Hofburg in a hybrid format with a reduced number of physical participants. Many Heads of Delegations, and, forcibly, persons who do not reside in Vienna, participate remotely. Decisions based on the consensus-principle have been taken either through the "silence procedure" or in online meetings. The first social activities are currently organized, but the main problem that remains is that the "normal way" in which diplomatic negotiations take place, through person-to-person interaction, is severely obstructed. The Vienna Liaison Office has continuously participated throughout all of this.

Despite these impediments, the PC finally managed to find consensus of the Current Unified Budget (with zero nominal growth and without a decision on the scales of contribution), the budget and mandate of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), and took several other important decisions. However, so far, no consensus has been found on the extension of the most senior positions in the OSCE (Secretary General, ODIHR Director, High Commissioner on National Minorities and Representative on the Freedom of the Media). These positions had been filled during the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship as a package, and they expire on July 18. Many delegations would like to see a smooth extension process, in order to avoid additional complications during the Pandemic. However, Azerbaijan has formally objected to the extension of Harlem Désir, the current Representative on the Freedom of the Media, thereby "opening the package", and requesting a vacancy procedure. Tajikistan added objections against the extension of the mandate of Ingibjörg Gísladóttir and, more in general, concerns regarding the regional balance of the leadership of the institutions. Turkey also revealed its objections against Désir's extension. There is also resistance from other delegations to the extension of the tenants of other positions, based on several different reasons. The obstacles created by the Pandemic to in-person negotiations do not make it easier to find consensus on this issue - which would, even under normal circumstances, put a heavy strain on any chairmanship.

It also appears that the rhetoric between participating States that are engaged in conflicts, and their supporters, has become more aggressive. It is unclear whether this is a consequence of actions on the ground (heavy increase in ceasefire violations in Ukraine, postponement of the next Normandy Four Summit, continuous "borderization" in Georgia, increased tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia, to name a few, as well as some developments in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean) or whether the lack of traditional in-person diplomacy and the particularities of video-transmitted statements have contributed to this development. There have also been verbal attacks on heads of field presences and deep disagreements over, for instance, the participation of a former NATO

official as keynote speaker, or the presence of a NATO Liaison Officer at the FSC meetings. Atmospherically, it accounts for a climate which is even less constructive than usual. Despite all these negative developments, the decision-making bodies of the OSCE managed to find consensus also on several other decisions:

Extension of the Deployment of OSCE Observers to Two Russian Checkpoints on the Russian-Ukrainian Border (until 30 September 2020) and of the Mandate of the OSCE Project Co-Ordinator In Ukraine (until 31 December 2020), Dates, Agenda and Organizational Modalities of the 2020 Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC), Date of the 2020 Meeting of The Heads of Verification Centers, Agenda, Timetable and Modalities for the Ninth Annual Discussion on the Implementation of The Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security and Second Biennial Meeting To Assess The Implementation of The OSCE Documents on Small Arms and Light Weapons and Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition.

The SMM continues to experience restrictions on its freedom of movement and SMM staff cannot cross the contact line since COVID-19 measures were adopted. Limitations in the deployment of staff is causing serious operational difficulties. Physical damage inflicted upon the SMM's assets is also increasingly threatening the safety of the mission.

The OSCE PA's heightened activity, mainly through webinars and online committee meetings, has been well noted by the OSCE community, and, in addition to political representatives and of the permanent missions in Vienna, there has been a strong interest in these meetings, as expressed by the attendance of staff from the OSCE Secretariat, Institutions and Field Presences. While cooperation was generally good, there have also been some developments which require further intensive discussion with the Chairmanship.

The PA's Liaison Office has continued to function both by tele-communing, participation in online-meetings and through physical presence (under specific safety measures) in the office and in the Hofburg. Office staff has also taken the lead in the organization of PA meetings and webinars.



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