

# The 2017 Austrian Chairmanship of the OSCE – Challenges and Perspectives

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*Dit artikel blikt vooruit op het komende Oostenrijkse voorzitterschap van de Organisatie voor Veiligheid en Samenwerking in Europa (OVSE) in 2017. Het onderzoekt de rol van de fungerend voorzitter in de voorbereiding van de agenda van de OVSE, analyseert het Oostenrijkse lidmaatschap van de OVSE en neemt de verwachtingen ten aanzien van het voorzitterschap in 2017 onder de loep rekening houdende met de veiligheids- en de politieke context. Ten slotte worden er enkele inputs gegeven voor domeinen waar het Oostenrijkse voorzitterschap succes zou kunnen boeken voor het einde van zijn mandaat.*

*Le présent article fait état des perspectives de la prochaine présidence autrichienne de l'Organisation pour la sécurité et la coopération en Europe (OSCE) en 2017. Il examine le rôle que joue le président en exercice dans l'élaboration de l'agenda de l'OSCE, analyse l'adhésion de l'Autriche à l'OSCE et se penche sur les attentes à l'égard de la présidence en 2017 en prenant en compte le contexte sécuritaire et politique. En guise de conclusion, quelques inputs sont mentionnés dans des domaines où la présidence autrichienne pourrait obtenir des succès avant la fin de son mandat, sont mentionnés.*



## **THE CHAIRMAN-IN-OFFICE**

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When the Helsinki Final Acts of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) laid down the foundation of the in 1995 re-named Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the role of the chairmanship had not been defined and did not exist as such.

It took 17 years, until the Helsinki Summit of the CSCE in July 1992, to institutionalise and define more precisely the OSCE chairman-in-office's (CiO) function and tasks. According to the final document entitled *The Challenges of Change*<sup>1</sup>, in its section on strengthening CSCE institutions and structures, the chairman-in-office is responsible for the co-ordination of and consultation on current OSCE business. In his activities as the chairman-in-office, the foreign minister of the chairing country is assisted by his predecessor and his successor. The three foreign ministers form together the OSCE Troika. The CiO has the authority to appoint personal representatives as well as the right to nominate heads of mission. In addition, he can recommend the formation of ad hoc steering groups. In carrying out his functions, the chairman has the support of the OSCE secretary general, currently the Italian Lamberto Zannier, and the Secretariat based in Vienna. However, it is just as important that he has excellent co-operation with OSCE institutions, such as the Parliamentary Assembly, the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and the Representative on Freedom of the Media. The first country holding the CSCE Chairmanship was Germany, from June 1991 to January 1992, followed by Czechoslovakia that held the chairmanship for a period of one year, which has become the customary time frame since then. Austria will be the 27<sup>th</sup> CiO in 2017.

## **AUSTRIA AND THE OSCE**

As a neutral and non-aligned state, Austria's foreign and security policy has always attached great importance to the CSCE process since its origins in late 1975. This process provided a multilateral forum for negotiation in which non-aligned small and medium-sized states were able to introduce their ideas on security, stability, and peace in Europe, as well as to act as a bridge between the two poles during the Cold War. From 1986 to 1989, Vienna was the location of the third CSCE follow-up meeting. After 1989, the CSCE/OSCE played an important role in reshaping the European political order. While before 1989 the politico-military dimension took precedence, the "human dimension" of

the “third basket” – embracing human rights, democracy, the rule of law, and minority rights – moved to the foreground afterwards.

Vienna has been the seat of the Conflict Prevention Centre since 1991. In 1993 the Secretariat and the Secretary General also moved to the current OSCE headquarters in Vienna. Since then Austria has been financing additional expenditures by assuming rental costs and providing conference rooms. Already in 1995, the same year that Austria became a member of the EU, Austria initially considered applying for the OSCE Chairmanship. However, during the second half of 1998, the Austrian government was confronted with the challenge of its first EU presidency. After its relatively successful conclusion, Austria applied for the OSCE Chairmanship at the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Oslo on 3 December 1998 and was elected unanimously. The chairmanship was taken over on 1 January 2000, at a time when the country faced the formation of a centre/right-wing ÖVP/FPÖ government under the then CiO. One month later Wolfgang Schüssel became chancellor. This led to the infamous fourteen EU imposed sanctions against Austria. This affected significantly the beginning of the chairmanship since also other non-EU countries, such as Norway, refused to meet with representatives of the newly formed government and the Austrian chairmanship was put into question. However, after ending the sanctions and testifying before the three EU “wise men” that Austria remained a democratic country, the 2000 chairmanship could be brought to a good end.

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### **THE FORTHCOMING AUSTRIAN CHAIRMANSHIP OF 2017**

At the Ministerial Council in Basel in 2014, Austria was tasked by the OSCE member states to take over the chairmanship in 2017. The 2017 chairmanship will mark the second Austrian chairmanship after 2000, with Austrian Foreign Minister Sebastian Kurz succeeding the German CiO Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

When looking at the context of the chairmanship, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the intervention in the eastern parts of Ukraine as well as the geopolitical rivalry between the Russian Federation and the United States and its allies have caused the most serious security crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Within the OSCE, this also meant a shift in the priorities of the work as the political-military basket was again top of the agenda. The events have also demonstrated the Europe’s division and the lack of common analysis and perception of the factors that have led to the change in Europe’s strategic environment. The development of diverging narratives about its causes as well

as contradicting perceptions of the political intention behind changing force postures and military activities of the Russian Federation and NATO countries have poisoned the political atmosphere and led to a feeling of confrontation. Increased military activities, large military manoeuvres, snap exercises without prior notification in border areas as well as reconnaissance flights and show of force in international sea and air spaces have fuelled new threat perceptions. They also harbour the risk of misjudgements and escalation resulting from brinkmanship and unintended incidents. In this context, it should not be forgotten either that other frozen conflicts on European soil also exist, such as in Moldova and Georgia, which are far from being solved.

On 14 July 2016 the incoming CiO, Sebastian Kurz, presented the key pillars of his chairmanship and highlighted three major threats to security and stability that all OSCE participating states and partners for co-operation are facing:

- (1) the continuing increase of military conflicts;
- (2) the growing threat to internal security through radicalisation and terrorism;
- (3) the continuing loss of confidence between states, as well as between citizens, on the one hand, and state institutions and organisations that need to safeguard their freedoms and values, on the other hand.

It has been considered that radicalisation and violent extremism are key challenges and that therefore prevention of radicalisation in cooperating with other partners is vital. Human rights and democracy, as well as inclusion of all groups in society, including a vibrant civil society, are the basis for internal stability. For that reason, the OSCE should contribute to developing strong institutions and economic perspectives in the OSCE region. The Minister also emphasised the Austrian role and experience as an honest broker and mediator in fostering dialogue and co-operation in the OSCE region. Given Austria's history and geographical location, Austria is best suited to function as a bridge between competing worlds.

Considering its mediating role in different conflicts, such as Ukraine, the frozen conflicts in Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Austria can build on the experiences and priorities of its foreign policy for strengthening security in Europe. Especially in the context of Ukraine, the OSCE is perceived as the only organisation able to mediate between the conflict parties since both of them are members of the OSCE, whereas the Minsk Group was established in order to overlook the implementation of the peace agreements.

Over the past decade the OSCE has concentrated on topics such as early warning, conflict prevention, non-military crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Moreover, the OSCE plays an important role for both arms control and disarmament in the field of conventional arms. The OSCE also works intensively on transnational threats, such as terrorism, radicalisation, illicit drugs, human trafficking, proliferation of weapons of mass-destruction and cyber security challenges, as well as on human rights and non-discrimination issues and the cooperation in the field of economy and environment. Therefore, the cyber dimension of security will have to be debated too in the context of the Austrian chairmanship.

One of the key pillars of the OSCE activities is confidence-building measures (CBMs) with which the OSCE wants to contribute to stability and security. Building on the concept of comprehensive security, the OSCE is active in the politico-military, economic, and environmental field and the very important human dimension. As a consequence, one of the key tasks of the Austrian chairmanship will be to re-think European security cooperation, focusing on CBMs and attempting to find new commitment models between the Russian Federation and the West. There is a need of stabilising the situation, deescalating tensions, and hedging in conflicts. This is particularly true for conventional arms control. In this context, Austria has already a good track record since the first documents regarding confidence and security-building measures were agreed at the 1986 Stockholm Ministerial and later laid down in the 1990 Vienna Document on confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) and regularly updated. The Austrian CiO will have to develop further the latest modification, the 2011 Vienna Document, which was adopted by the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) on 20 November 2011 and entered into force on 1 December. Its adoption gave a new level to the OSCE's politico-military dimension. It marked the end to an eleven-year deadlock in the field of CSBM modernisation within the FSC and constitutes a positive example of the ability of the participating states to negotiate and adapt important politically binding commitments without linking them to other contentious political issues, such as protracted conflicts or the stalemate of the CFE (Conventional Armed Forces in Europe) Treaty. The Document also contains a politically binding provision for a regular assessment of the Document at intervals of five years or less. Hence the Austrian CiO will deal with assessing the state of play of the Vienna Document.

## **CONCLUSION: HIGH EXPECTATIONS – WHICH OUTCOME?**

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The Austrian presidency in 2017 will undoubtedly be associated with relatively high expectations, not only due to the timing of its chairmanship but also due to the fact that Austria is the host country of the OSCE and the seat of the OSCE General Secretariat. It is by definition best apt to assume the CiO. The fact that Austria is the seat of the organisation will also create some specific opportunities: the symbolic effect of the location is not least due to the role of Vienna as a place of negotiations for important conferences and peace talks, for example the Syrian negotiations or the successful conclusion of the Iran nuclear talks.

Furthermore, as a neutral and non-aligned state and the host country for other international organisations and fora, such as the UNIDO, the IAEA, and the OPEC, Austria can assume a credible role as a mediator, having a significant advantage compared to especially NATO countries.

Particularly in the context of upcoming talks with Russia regarding not only Ukraine but also other conflicts in the region, this aspect should not be underestimated since Austria's special added value is the combination of EU membership and neutrality. At the same time, the conglomerate of international organisations in Vienna offers the opportunity of an efficient exchange on the spot, in which the know-how of the respective institutions can be accessed. With a view to the unresolved conflicts in the OSCE area, particularly in the West Balkans, it can be assumed that Austria will concentrate on its neighbouring region since security and stability in the immediate neighbourhood are of vital interest for Austria.

Defining the areas of priority action for the Austrian OSCE Chairmanship in 2017 seems to result logically from both the comparative assessment of the needs to redress the politico-military situation and the suitability of existing OSCE instruments to reduce risks and alleviate threat perceptions. Overcoming political blockades and linkages, however, will be most difficult and requires cautious approaches. Therefore, it seems advisable to aim at a structured dialogue on diverging risk perceptions in Europe and on concrete options to address security concerns. Although principles could be discussed in parallel, concrete proposals in the field of enhancing predictability of military action and restraining force posture developments should be explored on its own merits without early linkages and conditioning. However, one key issue should not be overlooked: the dynamics of the changing geopolitical context. Austria is taking over the chairmanship at a time of new geopolitical developments, such as the new American president who will take office shortly after the Austrian

CiO as well as rising tensions and radicalisation within European countries. As perfect as any chairmanship can be planned, unexpected events can require to rethinking and shifting priorities. Therefore, it will be better to have modest, achievable expectations that can be translated into sustainable policies later.

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<sup>1</sup> CSCE Helsinki Document 1992, The Challenges of Change, available at <http://www.osce.org/mc/39530?download=true> [05.11.2016].

<sup>2</sup> This section is largely based on Anselm Skuhra & Michael Merlingen: The Austrian OSCE Chairmanship – A Retrospective View. In: IFSH (eds.): OSCE Yearbook 2001, Nomos, pp. 45-63.



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