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Benefactor, industry or intruder? Perceptions of international organizations in Central Asia – the case of the OSCE in Tajikistan

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ABSTRACT

Soon after the breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991, a civil war started in Tajikistan (1992–97). This was also the period when a number of international organizations arrived in the country to distribute humanitarian assistance and assist in conflict resolution and stabilization. After the UN, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was the second key organization which appeared in the conflict-stricken country. Like other key international organizations in Tajikistan, the OSCE, which has been in the country since 1994, has seen a shift in its original functions of monitoring and emergency assistance. Some see its avowed objectives in the new century as formalistic, virtual and ineffective. By capturing perceptions of foreign assistance to Tajikistan among employees of the OSCE and other international organizations, NGO workers, government officials and ordinary citizens, this article explores how Tajikistan ‘socialized’ the OSCE, making the organization simultaneously a benefactor, an industry and even an intruder.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia; international organization; NGO; OSCE; post-communism; post-conflict rehabilitation; post-Soviet; public opinion; socialization; Soviet Union; Tajikistan; UN

Introduction

The arrival of international organizations (IOs) in Tajikistan followed the commencement of the country’s brutal five-year civil war in 1992, a year after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹ The UN was the first. UN agencies such as UNICEF, the World Health Organization, the World Food Programme and the UN Development Programme had initially begun distributing flour and clothes in parts of the country affected by fighting. In turn, the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration assisted refugees and internally displaced persons in returning home. Other Western IOs and NGOs supported peace talks between the warring factions through high-level negotiations in neighbouring countries and conflict-prevention work in mahallas,² primarily in the south of the country, where the fighting was the most intense (Tadjbakhsh 1996). Among other things, during the Tajik civil war, IOs assisted an estimated 55,000 orphaned children, 25,000 widowed women, and more than a million refugees and internally displaced persons (Erturk 2009).
After the UN agencies, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was the second Western-dominated agency to arrive in Tajikistan. In 1992, Tajikistan signed the Helsinki Final Act, which had originally been signed by the USSR and 34 other states in 1975. Immediately after this, it permitted the opening of an OSCE field presence in the country in February 1992, only three months before the breakout of the civil war, and by early 1994 the OSCE had set up its mission in the country. Initially, the OSCE mission was entrusted with a task to help for stabilization of the situation in the country and to create favorable conditions for the promotion of democratic processes. Indeed, conflict stabilization was the initial role of the OSCE in Tajikistan. In 1994, the Tajik government agreed to participate in peace talks with the armed United Tajik Opposition, mediated by the UN (Saunders 1999). The negotiations, in addition to the two fighting blocks, included observers from neighbouring countries, Russia and Iran, as well as the OSCE and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (Fischer 2013). The peace agreement which was signed in June 1997 in Moscow and officially ended the civil war was a product of these three-year-long mediated negotiations. The peace agreement obliged the government to return refugees and internally displaced persons; it foresaw disarmament and reintegration of the United Tajik Opposition fighters; it included a ‘reciprocal pardon’ act, which included amnesty for war crimes; and it guaranteed 30% of the seats in the parliament to the United Tajik Opposition.

Since its independence from the Soviet Union and into its post-conflict years, Tajikistan has ratified a number of international agreements on human rights. In this way the country hoped to be accepted by the international community as an equal member. Among other benefits, membership in IOs increased foreign assistance to the country. During the 1990s, net official development assistance to Tajikistan increased from 5% of GDP in 1994 to 15% of GDP in 2000 (World Bank 2014a). After the first phase of international assistance dominated by humanitarian aid, the early 2000s marked a new direction of assistance for Tajikistan, that of post-conflict stabilization and democratization (Nichol 2012). The new mandate of the OSCE in Tajikistan from 2002 thus focused on ‘early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation’.

Tajikistan’s post-civil-war stabilization efforts by IOs coincided with the US-led ‘global war on terror’, a reaction to the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, and the war on the Taliban and Al-Qaida in Afghanistan in 2001. This bought a shift in donors’ commitments to the country and the Central Asian region as a whole, with additional attention being paid to Tajikistan, which has the longest post-Soviet border (approximately 1400 km) with Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, 2001 marked a peak in international assistance to Tajikistan, with official development assistance corresponding to 16% of Tajikistan’s 2001 GDP (World Bank 2014a). In the post-9/11 context, security assistance, including counter-narcotics, counter-extremism and counter-terrorism, became the major field of donor interest in Tajikistan (De Danieli 2011). In 2008, in reaction to the government’s claim that insufficient attention was being paid by the OSCE to economic and security matters, as opposed to human rights, a new mandate for the OSCE in Tajikistan was approved, wherein the OSCE vowed to assist the government ‘in the areas of, inter alia, police-related activities, border management and security and anti-trafficking’. In this way, since 2008, by shifting priorities towards such areas as policing, border management, demining, anti-drug and human trafficking and their associated large budgetary outlays, the OSCE presence...
in Tajikistan has become, according to Lewis (2011, 45), ‘a much larger enterprise than in other Central Asian republics’. At the same time, the focus on security assistance which IOs, including the OSCE in Tajikistan, have been providing to Central Asian governments was problematized by Heathershaw and Megoran (2011, 609) and by Heathershaw and Montgomery (2014, 1). Their work suggests that by providing this kind of assistance, IOs contribute to state-led discourses on danger whose aim is not to counter real security threats but to legitimize oppressive regimes.

In 2013, the volume of international aid to Tajikistan totalled US$ 268 million and corresponded to 5–8% of the country’s GDP (Government of Tajikistan 2014). Although over the years the interest of IOs in Tajikistan has been declining, following the reduction in donor interest, judging by the numbers, it appears that the OSCE is fine and well – financially, that is. The OSCE’s budget and personnel have grown substantially, with the organization maintaining a large office in Dushanbe and five sub-offices, in Qurghonteppa, Shahritus, Kulob, Garm and Khujand. Between 2008 and 2013, the budget for the OSCE office in Tajikistan doubled, reaching €6.7 million in 2013 (OSCE 2014), while at €7.3 million in 20157 and €7.8 million in 2016,8 the budget for the OSCE mission in Tajikistan was the highest of all of OSCE’s Central Asian and Caucasian offices.

Following that introduction, which aimed at portraying the trajectories of foreign aid and the main features of the OSCE in Tajikistan, this article will briefly review the emerging literature engaging critically with foreign aid in the region and develop an analytical framework for conceptualizing the peculiarities of the OSCE presence in Tajikistan. This will be followed by the empirical segment of the article, showing how the OSCE is seen by various actors in Tajikistan.

Foreign aid and its discontents

International relations define an IO as an institution with international membership, presence and scope. Two main types of IOs are distinguished: NGOs operating internationally and intergovernmental organizations (such as the OSCE, which includes 58 participating states). In turn, foreign or international aid or assistance managed by IOs is a voluntary transfer of money, infrastructure and knowledge from one state to another (Lancaster 2007). These definitions, however, say little about what an IO is from the perspective of an aid-receiving country and its peoples, or rather, what IOs become or are perceived as having become during a complex process of interaction and intersubjective socialization with the state and population of the country they operate in.

The case of foreign aid in Central Asia fits into the broader literature which attempts to conceptualize development assistance globally. In a satirical story about ‘Aidland’, a parallel universe created by IOs in aid-receiving countries, Anthorpe (2011, 199) argues that ‘Aidland has its own mental topographies, languages of discourse, lore and custom, and approaches to organizational knowledge and learning.’ And according to Ferguson (1990), whose work on the World Bank projects in Lesotho provided one of the first anatomies of development aid, this happens because IOs are ‘anti-politics machines’. The real causes of impoverishment, argues Ferguson, are often political, stemming from corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. However, in designing development projects, IOs depoliticize the causes of poverty and focus on effects, by delivering social services. Overall, in development projects, therefore, the institution of the state is bypassed.
This is also the case with foreign aid projects designed with the particular aim of improving governance. Writing about American donors aiding democratization processes in other countries, Carothers (2011) claims that too much attention is given by donors to aid itself (improving implementation and evaluation of projects), rather than understanding the context of aid-receiving countries and elaborating proper strategies. These accounts, however, deal with only one side of foreign aid: aid-givers. Aid is a relationship between two parties, aid-givers and aid-receivers, and is thus a two-way process. Even if IOs are disconnected from the reality of countries where they operate, as argued by Lancaster (2007) in his history of Western foreign assistance, aid has always changed the relations between the parties involved.9

Tajikistan and international aid

Although a number of authors have written critically about the implications of the presence of IOs in Central Asia, the common narrative treats IOs as the subject, while the aid-receiving state remains a passive counterpart of development assistance. Attention is given to right or wrong strategic interventions by IOs, and how they obtain good results, or fail to do so. As an example, Sievers (2003) argues that IOs in Central Asia are ineffective because by bringing Western ideas and approaches to the region, they treat Central Asian countries as tabula rasa. They discredit the endowment of over 70 years of Soviet rule and experiences, in addition to the particularities of the post-Soviet or ‘neo-Soviet’ (Heathershaw 2009a) social and political fabric of Central Asian states. Referring particularly to Tajikistan, Tadjbakhsh (1995, 1996) offered the first insight into the misguided strategies of IOs. She explains that in the final period of the Tajik civil war, unequal distribution of humanitarian aid between different regions of the country worked against the fostering of societal reconciliation and aggravated tensions between an already regionally torn Tajikistan. On a similar note, Heathershaw (2005, 2008, 2009b) compares the clashing concepts of peace-building in Tajikistan, arguing that peace-building, as a UN-promoted concept, through support for neoliberal civil society, is foreign to Tajikistan and ignores two other relevant historic concepts: Soviet mirotvorchestvo (peace-keeping/peace-building), which strengthens state institutions, and Tajik tinji (peace/stability), which involves conflict mitigation and compromise at its early stage and at the level of local communities.

In turn, the work of Freizer (2005) looks at the newly imported model of neoliberal civil society, which contradicts or competes with traditional forms of civil society in Central Asia, such as choikhona (teahouse), mahalla (neighbourhood) and hashar (community labour). From another angle, Sumie Nakaya (2007, 2009) argues that international assistance to post-civil-war Tajikistan focused primarily on economic liberalization and privatization, rather than on implementation of inclusive peace agreements. This led to strengthening of the victors of the civil war, namely the new southern political elite, the Kulobis, who were already in control of land and infrastructure; this inadvertent accommodation of the civil war’s victors exacerbated the sense of exclusion of other political forces in Tajikistan. Czerniecka and Heathershaw (2011) offer yet another angle on international engagement in the region with the example of EU assistance to Central Asia, which prioritizes border control and limits irregular migration flows. They demonstrate through this example that the areas and strategies of international assistance reflect the priorities of
the aid-sending countries (ideas of the free market, strong civil society and border security) rather than the needs and priorities of Central Asian countries.

Aid creates a dependency mentality, which provokes changes in the state structure, economy and even culture of the receiving countries. And the state changes the IO to the same extent. In an article on two different security models promoted in Central Asia by the OSCE and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Lewis (2012) poses an important question: ‘Who is socializing whom?’ He argues that the

initial Western ideas that post-Soviet states in Central Asia would be ‘socialized’ into acceptance of a broader liberal normative framework have not been fulfilled; instead, this unilateral socialization has been replaced by a much more complex pattern of mutual interaction. (1220)

The 1990 Charter of Paris and the subsequent Copenhagen Document of the same year, which laid the foundation for the OSCE commitments in the region, such as human rights and fundamental freedoms (e.g. rights of freedom of expression, demonstration and property ownership), met with little domestic support in Central Asian states (Lewis 2011, 2012). The socialization approach has proven to be largely ineffective, and even inappropriate, in Central Asia.

To guarantee its presence in Central Asia despite the reluctance of the government to adopt reforms, the OSCE softened its discourse on human rights and focused on areas such as security assistance. As argued by Lewis (2011), paradoxically, in this way the organization has ‘often compromised OSCE ideals by supporting forces that have been accused of human rights abuses and high-level corruption’. For example, as Reyna Artur kzy (2015) demonstrates, the OSCE in Kyrgyzstan has been accused of helping the Kyrgyz regime suppress anti-regime demonstrations in 2005 and 2010 via pricy police assistance and training projects which the OSCE implemented throughout the years. The example of the OSCE in Tajikistan serves as another counterintuitive case of not an IO transforming an aid-receiving state, but the other way around.

What is the OSCE in Tajikistan?

If Lewis’s (2011) argument holds, then two questions need answering: Why and how has Tajikistan ‘socialized’ the OSCE? The empirical part of this article will show that the OSCE could be ‘socialized’ without any particular effort of the Tajik government, because of the inherent limitations and flaws of the development aid (including security assistance) apparatus of the OSCE. It will also be demonstrated that Tajikistan has ‘socialized’ the OSCE, making the organization simultaneously a benefactor, an industry and an intruder.

OSCE as benefactor

Who should benefit and who does benefit from IOs’ presence in a given country? Two main directions can be identified in the mandates of most IOs: assistance to the government in solving operational challenges and improving governance; and provision of services to the population. This means that both the state and the population are to benefit directly from the presence of IOs. Practically, though, the term ‘benefitting’ has different connotations on the ground and in reality than in theory, including the mandates of IOs.
If a textbook definition of an IO focuses on its international membership, the first and most common local definition stresses that an IO is a donor organization. Unlike Western member states, Tajikistan does not contribute financially in any substantial manner to the IOs it is a member of. Instead, the country benefits from other states which pay higher membership fees. Tajikistan remains heavily dependent on foreign assistance. Significant industrial infrastructure is absent; and income equivalent to half of the country’s GDP comes in the form of remittances from Tajik migrant workers living predominantly in Russia, making Tajikistan number one in the world in that category (World Bank 2014b). As a former OSCE employee explains:

Unlike Turkmenistan, which is a country rich in natural gas and can sustain its own economy, landlocked and mountainous Tajikistan cannot build a wall around itself and isolate itself from the international community. [And even though] Tajikistan has [substantial amounts of] water, it cannot use it without permission of Uzbekistan.\(^{10}\)

Unlike most IOs, which have narrow objectives, the OSCE in Tajikistan has a broad mandate to assist the government. The website of the OSCE claims that:

The OSCE Office is tasked with assisting Tajikistan in its efforts to tackle security problems and threats, prevent conflicts and work on crisis management in such areas as policing, border management, and anti-trafficking. Other tasks include the improvement of business contacts; the development of energy, transport, investment, and scientific and technical exchange; the protection of the environment; good governance; and the development of a legal framework and democratic political institutions and processes, including the respect for human rights.\(^{11}\)

Because of the organization’s broad mandate of aiding Tajikistan as an OSCE participating state, its projects engage primarily with the government on the policy-making level, but also with the population through providing certain services. At the beginning of the calendar year, each unit or thematic office of the OSCE mission confirms its activities with the respective ministries, based on supposed assessment of the current needs of the country.

As for the state, various benefits are obtained from IOs’ presence. In the case of the OSCE, first of all, the government benefits from resources and expertise which Tajikistan does not possess by itself. That said, the state also takes material advantage of OSCE’s resources. A former OSCE employee says, for example, that ‘every small change in the criminal code is lobbied, drafted and paid for with OSCE [and UN] money.’\(^{12}\) At the same time, the benefits of the government can go beyond assistance in improving governance. Hosting IOs boosts the prestige and legitimacy of the country primarily in the eyes of outsiders, who might consider the government one that desires to cooperate with the international community and is open to reform. A former employee of the OSCE argues: ‘Membership in IOs brings international prestige, and the only way Tajikistan can be involved in the international community is through implementation of the recommendations of IOs.’\(^{13}\) An OSCE employee in Tajikistan, in turn, claims:

This is why Tajikistan is so interested in keeping IOs. It is an authoritarian state, constantly on the path towards [an elusive] democratization. Despite 23 years having passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union [and 15 years since the end of the civil war], the government always stresses the occurrence of the civil war and implies that we still need help, that we still need to build everything from scratch. The civil war is also a justification for human rights abuses. But at the same time the state shows openness towards inviting IOs. The international community does not know the Tajik context. They only see that Tajikistan is
constantly ready and desires reforms. The state thus uses the presence of IOs for its own benefit [and longevity].

And this symbiotic relationship continues, given that in the great majority of cases, IOs do not withdraw from the country despite the resistance of the state to adopting necessary reforms. Tajikistan can thus always be improving without ever actually having improved, even having, in reality, regressed. Endless democratization, however, requires the endless financial and technical assistance of IOs. From this perspective, maintaining the status quo is in the interest of the regime and its bureaucrats, as well as the IOs and their technocrats, because it guarantees survival and material benefits for both sets of beneficiaries.

On this same theme, the presence of multiple IOs can also provide an excuse for the government not to adopt structural reforms. An OSCE employee provides an example:

When the European Union asked the Tajik authorities to limit corruption, the state answered that [it is, indeed, doing so, as] the OSCE is already working on it [via an anti-corruption project]. It is of minor importance for the government that the same project of the OSCE has been a failure.

Furthermore, as one employee of an IO says, because such a small part of IO funds is spent on actual vulnerable people, the IOs’ presence has become an alternative financial source to help run the public sector of Tajikistan: ‘Much of the funds of the IOs are spent on renting overpriced venues, cars, overhead, rents for landlords, and taxes.’ Among other things, for example, the OSCE field missions in Europe and Eurasia are normally a cooperative effort with the region’s government, with states, despite financial hardships, at the minimum providing in-kind contributions, such as provision of premises. In Tajikistan, however, the field mission pays a monthly rent of US$ 25,000 to the state for use of the premises.

The government further benefits from IOs because by creating an alternative well-paid job market, they in essence appease potential social discontent in the young, educated and unemployed strata of the society. For the middle to upper-middle class in Tajikistan, people who have had the opportunity to study English and have a ‘development’-related marketable skill, IOs are the only place to find well-paid jobs. A former employee of the OSCE explains how personal financial security interacts with security promoted by the organization:

The OSCE attracts rather nihilistic workers, both expatriate and locals, with the aim of job security and personal income generation. There is virtually no liberal idealism associated with such individuals. The OSCE’s functions, in turn, are superficial and sufficient to satisfy its annual reports to Vienna and other donors.

For young, educated Tajik people who have not decided to emigrate, employment in IOs is a dream to follow, and a common subject of discussion among their peers. An NGO worker admits: ‘Often … people are jealous of employees of IOs and their salaries.’

Some argue, however, that IOs do achieve small-scale changes on the ground. A former employee of the OSCE is convinced that despite the limitations of the OSCE, its work is beneficial for a broader population:

Despite bureaucratic procedures, monotone documents and expensive experts, in the end thanks to endless trainings, for example, journalists have become more professional, they
have learned how to use social media and electronic equipment; other people have had a chance to study abroad; there is access to water in some areas of Tajikistan; migrants receive free legal advice and learn how to fill out the necessary documents. [This is so] even if the people do not know who the [specific] donor is.  

The population benefits from such services. The government also benefits from the presence of IOs. International aid has in some instances delegated provision of what were supposed to be public services from the state to the IOs. Until 1991, Tajiks lived in a socialist and social Soviet state. The current Tajik state is neither socialist nor social. As several interviewees mentioned, because of the substantial international aid right after the civil war there was no transition of competences in the area of welfare between the Soviet regime and the new government that emerged in 1994. According to an employee of an IO, ‘During the civil war, the state collapsed and the government withdrew from the social sector [and] IOs filled this niche, even if they today provide assistance only on a small scale.’ Another interviewee agrees: ‘We all know that services for vulnerable women and children should be provided by the state. But we also know that these services are being provided, instead, by IOs and the local NGOs financed by them.’ This suggests that it is important to distinguish between the short-term and long-term effects that OSCE’s activities have on the state. While in the short term the population benefits from assistance provided by the organization, in the long term such provision of services contributes to developing a mentality of dependency on aid in state structures. 

Does the broader public recognize the IOs as benefactors? In comparing the norms and commitments of IOs with what ordinary people in Tajikistan know about them, it turns out that people are not aware of the role of long-standing IOs in their country. Since the civil war, people in Tajikistan have been used to identifying IOs with the white four-wheel-drive vehicles with blue licence plates originally associated with UN staff driving around the country. A Dushanbe dweller admits:

Sometimes I have the impression that IO workers consider themselves rather important, but in reality people do not know them. People can mention the name of the UN because they hear it on TV. But they have no clue what [the UN and other] IOs actually do [in Tajikistan].

In rural areas only people who have received help from IOs may know them. An NGO worker implementing an OSCE-funded project says: ‘We organize events to tell people about the donor, we distribute pens and T-shirts. But at the end, only the ones who have received legal help from us know the OSCE.’

There is one more beneficiary, the OSCE itself. In the first place, IOs are both benefactors and beneficiaries of their own presence. An employee of an IO states that it is in their interests to secure their own survival by securing the continuity of projects:

To be honest, staff is the one who benefits most from projects. They benefit from good salaries, I also do. So does each IO globally – the regional office, the headquarters, [and] the entire bureaucracy apparatus . . . . International assistance [thus] circulates within an IO as salaries, [exaggerated] per diem [and other financial and material benefits].

The role of the OSCE as a benefactor for Tajikistan encompasses different, sometimes contradictory, aspects. The benefits which Tajikistan gains from the OSCE are not only financial or technical. The OSCE provides Tajikistan with knowledge and expertise which
the government does not have or cannot afford. The organization also provides a question-able range of public services to vulnerable groups in the population. On the other hand, membership in the OSCE provides legitimacy for the government, despite its resistance to reforms. Moreover, it cements the status quo, in which the elites do not demand changes because they are employed in IOs; and the government does not feel obliged to provide services to the citizens, because they are already being provided by IOs. Finally, through the longevity of development assistance, the OSCE as an organization and expanding bureaucracy, both in Central Asia and in its headquarters, benefits from its own presence in Tajikistan.

**OSCE as industry**

While during the civil war international aid to Tajikistan was unconditional, in that it focused neither on immediate results nor on transparent administration, two decades on, the process has turned into the efficient bureaucratized industrial-like production of well-financed and formally documented reports to donors. Given the millions of euros spent with often no visible results in the way of development or democratization, some donors have learnt their lesson and become more demanding. The all-embracing bureaucracy of IOs serves the spending of donor funds, namely public funds of Western states. At the same time, such bureaucracies occupy most of the working time in IOs. As one interviewee says: ‘In the world of IOs, the bureaucracy has expanded to such an extent that people do not reflect [or matter] anymore’ – i.e. the financial component of ‘project implementation’ has overtaken any benefits that the same projects are meant to convey to the locals.

The bureaucracy is one of the reasons why the cleavage between the norms and commitments of the OSCE, as stated in the mandate, and the reality on the ground remains large. A former employee of the OSCE claims that ‘the rhetoric [of security and cooperation, human rights and democratization] is often not understood, or even known, by the OSCE workers themselves – both expatriate and locals, let alone being implemented and transmitted into the country’. Such perceptions are not limited to employees of the OSCE. Many employees of IOs perceive international aid in Tajikistan as a multitasking industry which produces ‘development’, in reality meaning discourses on development and working-places. ‘Development’ is a key word in the rhetoric generated by IOs; it includes such sub-terms as ‘developing infrastructure’, ‘developing human capital’ and ‘developing capacities of the government’. According to one interviewee,

IO-led ‘development’ is nothing but a discourse which was created in the West in the way the West has highlighted its hegemony. IOs come to Tajikistan bringing a ready recipe. They tell the people: ‘Do this and that, and your life will become better.’ They want Tajiks to be like them. The only difference between Tajiks and employees of IOs is that we [employees of IOs] receive good salaries, while Tajik people continue working for peanuts.

The industry of language expands. Besides ‘development’, more recently ‘impact’ has become another key word in the lingo of IOs. Unlike the outputs and outcomes of IO activities, impact is more difficult to measure. It refers to a marked and broad effect on the country. Asking about impact is tricky because it tests the approaches and strategies of IOs. As a former employee of the OSCE explains:
Until a year ago [early 2014] the OSCE did not pay much attention either to impact or outcomes. Only outputs used to matter. For example, only a year ago did we begin collecting information not only on how many leaflets were distributed to people, but on how many people come to our centres after [supposedly] reading these leaflets.30

The ‘industry’ is run through projects. Most IOs in Tajikistan are project offices, i.e. they implement projects which their donors seek or have agreed to fund. The OSCE does the same, but is different from other IOs not only because it has a bigger mandate, but also because of its short fiscal time frame. Each year, there is an internal budget for Tajikistan and other OSCE field missions from the general unified budget of the organization. Though extra-budgetary funds also play a big role, unlike other IOs, given the near-guarantee of funding each year, OSCE field missions can function at their base level without continuously seeking wealthy donors to fund projects. As for operational modalities, the OSCE is similar to other IOs because its country budget is then divided into specific projects. According to one former employee of the OSCE, ‘Similar to other IOs and NGOs, the OSCE complements the state by provision of projects which actually are funded nicely, though the vast majority will achieve little as they are symbolic and in realm of rhetoric, rather than results-oriented.’31 Furthermore, as another former employee of the OSCE points out, often the fact of spending the money allocated in the budget becomes more important than the presumed benefits of the activity or project itself:

Sometimes I have the impression that we work for the sake of bureaucracy. There is always the same scheme: fifteen participants in a seminar, two international experts, accommodations for all, distribution of per diem, buying tickets. You could [often] find better [and far more economical] experts in Tajikistan, but the OSCE [and its managers] seek to use up the organization’s yearly budget [and it is easier to do so if you use expensive expatriate experts rather than the local variety].32

Another way for the OSCE field missions, including the office in Tajikistan, to easily spend their allocated budgets is to send government officials and bureaucrats, NGO workers and OSCE staff on costly ‘exposure trips’ and to a myriad roundtables and conferences, mostly held in European capitals, throughout each year.

On this same theme, experts are part of the industry.33 International experts are hired to provide recommendations to the government, conduct assessments before project writing, or prepare law and situational analyses. Although there is no doubt that they are recruited through a competitive internal selection process, in practice, in many cases, such international experts do not have solid knowledge of the country; quite often do they not even speak the local languages, Russian and Tajik. As a former employee of the OSCE explains, these factors combined with time constrains make the overall work of such consultants rather ineffective: ‘Expats come in with little knowledge of Tajikistan and with a tight timeframe. They do not have time to learn about the culture, [history] and policies [of the country]. They thus provide recommendations which may not be workable.’34

The industry lives on its own. A common objection to IO projects is that their rationale lacks a good assessment of the local reality and needs. What can be labelled the ‘neoliberal approach’ of IOs – with its focus on liberal economics, often detached from political realities – is normally foreign to local communities. As an example, in recent years there has
been a boom in income-generating projects for vulnerable groups of the population in Tajikistan. One interviewee argues why such projects miss the point:

It seems that now everyone wants Tajiks to become entrepreneurs. They keep giving women sewing machines and telling them how to sell clothes, bags and socks. This is not how Tajikistan will become rich. It is when you eliminate corruption that economic conditions will improve. But it is easier to distribute sewing machines than to engage with [and address the far larger issue of] corrupt officials.

This is how the OSCE becomes an anti-politics machine, as described by Ferguson (1990). The OSCE, like other IOs present in Tajikistan, produce their own narrative of development. Their narrative is simple and linear. First, the economic situation in Tajikistan is bad. Second, the solution to this problem is to foster income-generating activities among the population. According to this narrative, the OSCE and other IOs are the benefactors who can solve economic problems by (generously) supporting entrepreneurship among the most vulnerable groups in the population. But the real roots of the economic problems the country faces are corruption, the off-shore accounts of government officials, and monopolization of the market by political (and at the same time economic) elites (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017).

The industry has, in turn, produced a neoliberal form of civil society. Thanks to the continuous support of IOs, neoliberal civil society has flourished in the post-conflict period in much of Central Asia. In Tajikistan, by the time the 1997 peace agreement was signed, the number of newly registered NGOs exceeded 3400 (Fischer 2013), though the number of active NGOs is probably not more than 5–10% of this. At the same time, if in the post-conflict period there was an understanding between IOs, NGOs, the population and the state, in the mid-2000s this trust disappeared, mainly because of low efficiency and corruption among profit-driven NGOs and state institutions. But there was also another reason. The head of a Dushanbe-based NGO says that ‘since 2007–08, the understanding between civil society organizations and IOs has become rather murky. This is because IOs began to choose their favourite NGOs and exclude others.’ Unwritten rules agreed upon between IOs and selected NGOs are a common practice and an open secret in Tajikistan. To comply with regulations indicated by headquarters, for example, most IOs are required to announce transparent tenders while choosing NGOs as implementing partners of projects. However, often when the tender is being announced, it is already known which NGO has won the grant. Some NGOs, in turn, are known to grease the wheels by providing as much as 10% of donor funds back to the (normally local) bureaucrats of the same donor agencies so as to guarantee more funds in the future. One interviewee told of knowing of such ‘kickback’ schemes practised by staff of a UN agency and a prominent Western embassy in Dushanbe.

Over two decades of presence in Tajikistan has created and cemented a unique system of mutual accommodations between IOs and the state, as well. According to an OSCE employee:

The Tajik state can refuse to cooperate with the OSCE, and in many ways it does so. It is easy to refuse to cooperate. Government officials often agree to specific projects but then do not answer [phone calls] and letters, they do not come to meetings [and roundtables] with their OSCE counterparts. Theoretically the OSCE should withdraw in these situations, but that would mean that we need to close the office [or the project, and if we do so] many
will lose their jobs. So the OSCE says: Let us try to implement a similar project, but from a different angle.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus, if the government does not really want to cooperate on specific thematic projects, which they may have initially approved but which they now feel hurt the interests of the regime, mechanisms of fake involvement begin to take hold. Pricy seminars and workshops replace real policy-oriented activities. One interviewee elaborates: ‘We need to involve authorities in our projects, seminars, workshops, and in order to do so, we have to provide incentives for them, otherwise officials would not show up. So we buy their participation with coffee breaks, good per diem, receptions, and even luxurious dinners with music.’\textsuperscript{41} The aim is to keep the industry of projects running, which results in near-fake projects which are written for the sake of spending the allocated budget, with little regard for the avowed objectives of the project.

If over 20 years of presence of the OSCE in Tajikistan has not fostered key positive structural changes in the country, this is not only because of the reluctance of the state to conduct reforms, but also because of internal structural ineffectiveness of the organization, and inappropriate assumptions and approaches. The OSCE falls into the trap of other IOs, in that despite its wide mandate and resources, the organization is a consolidated industry producing development language, bureaucracy, ‘development’ projects and neoliberal civil society, while they resist political change and maintain the status quo, including deteriorating democratization and ubiquitous corruption.

\textbf{OSCE as intruder}

The relationship between the Tajik government and IOs is complex and at first seems incomprehensible. On the one hand, as one employee of the OSCE mission observes, ‘In the current economic situation, the government is looking for money and [virtually] accepts any entity which can provide it with financial benefits.’\textsuperscript{42} On the other hand, some argue that international assistance is normally not unconditional (Fawn\textsuperscript{2013}), and membership in an IO means that there is an international community which follows the actions of the state and checks whether the values of the organization are being represented. An employee of an IO posits: ‘An IO is an institution which wants to share its values.’\textsuperscript{43} These values are often different from the values of the government. A former employee of the OSCE argues:

An IO is a watchdog in your country, the eyes of the international community, which follow you like Big Brother. If Tajikistan destroys its reputation in front of the international community, IOs [can] withdraw their money.\textsuperscript{44}

The real picture is more complicated, however, and to a large extent depends on the IO’s field of activity. According to a former state employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan:

There are different types of IOs, e.g. IOs which build infrastructure and do not interfere in politics; they can operate far more freely. And then there are IOs which deal with politics, elections and democratization; they are always viewed with suspicion.\textsuperscript{45}

The case of the OSCE in Tajikistan, which deals with three different but theoretically interconnected dimensions of security, is an example of nuances in the state–IO relationship for
a single organization in Central Asia. Though the state supports the assistance of the OSCE in the politico-military dimension, which includes such fields as border management, demining, police reform and anti-terrorism, the engagement of the OSCE in the economic-environmental dimension, which touches upon the political elite’s monopoly over the economy, and in the human dimension, which includes maintaining standards in the field of human rights and democratization, is not welcome, at least not in their true intended forms. According to a former employee of the OSCE:

The Tajik government would like an organization which deals only with the first, security dimension, and from its point of view this is logical. The second dimension means interfering in the economic interests of the regime, but the third dimension is even worse, because the OSCE interferes in areas such as lack of political pluralism and human rights standards.46

Open mistrust on the government’s side can be distinctly observed since early 2014, corresponding to the Ukraine crisis, when ideological conflict between the pro-Western Euromaidan movement and the pro-Russian, secessionist-oriented eastern parts of the country escalated into a military confrontation. A former employee of the OSCE comments on how the situation in Ukraine has influenced Tajikistan, drawing on the similarities between the regimes in the two countries:

The most recent concerns of the [Tajik] government likely come from the Ukraine crisis and the departure of [Ukraine’s President Victor] Yanukovych, a neo-Soviet likeness of the Tajik leader. If Yanukovych can be ousted, he [Tajikistan’s president, Emomali Rahmon] can be, too. Thus the state must be vigilant for any foreign funding and activities in Tajikistan [which in its mind can destabilize the country into a Ukraine-like crisis and regime change].47

Moreover, as another interviewee notes, the rhetoric of mistrust of IOs can be quite effective because it recalls still vivid memories of the Tajik civil war, which divided the population and led to thousands of (perhaps 50,000) deaths:

If you pay attention to the last speeches of the president, you will notice that there are two returning motives: the civil war on the one hand and the need to control [foreign influences in the country or] IOs on the other.48

The anti-Western rhetoric among Tajik officials further escalated in May 2014 after the unrest in an autonomous part of Tajikistan, mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO, Badakhshan). Clashes between the residents of Khorog, the capital of Badakhshan, and the central government’s security forces reminded one of the events in Ukraine. For the government, the IOs and Western embassies became a scapegoat and a real or imaginary enemy to blame for the unrest. As reported by Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, at a conference organized in Dushanbe by the OSCE after the May events in Khorog, the head of Tajikistan’s State Committee of National Security, Saymumin Yatimov, said:

Recently, there has been a big geopolitical and ideological game surrounding Tajikistan. Under the guise of non-governmental organizations, they [alleged Western ‘spies’] use methods which are not good for the people living in Tajikistan. First of all, there are [Western] intelligence services in Tajikistan, whose official status I do not want to mention here, which spend large sums of money, and at the same time cooperate with organized crime. They prepare them to fight against our security, in this way undermining the safety of our nation (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2014).
Yatimov was also quoted as having said that ‘some NGOs working under the aegis of international organizations threaten our security’ (Asia Plus 2014).

A few days later, another Tajik politician and member of parliament, Amirqul Azimov, accused IOs in Tajikistan of interfering with the domestic affairs of the country and fuelling separatism in Badakhshan:

It should be our duty to explain to the people that they should not blindly believe in ideas such as democracy. There are states which sometimes are not interested in maintaining stability in Tajikistan. For example, the representatives of the European Union [prior to the clashes in Badakhshan] had a meeting with a former field commander [and anti-government fighter], Mahmadoqir Mahmadoqirov, in Khorog. How can we interpret this? Don’t you think that such meetings take place in order to destabilize Badakhshan? We realize that there are people who want our country to disintegrate. This is how IOs are playing their games (Gulhoja and Hamdam 2014).

A former state official explains the logic behind such thinking, claiming that because the mandates of IOs do not require their recommendations to be legally binding, the IOs act cunningly:

They put pressure on us [to adopt reforms] through so-called ‘project implementing partners’: civil society and local NGOs which are servants of foreign masters. IOs finance them, so they can tell them to criticize the government on [alleged] human rights abuses [and] torture.49

At the end, the interviewee admits that many times there are also purely psychological aspects behind the mistrust: ‘Some employees of ministries hate the IOs because they talk with them in such a manner to demonstrate their own superiority [and the inferiority of the natives], while showing little respect for the Tajik government.’50

Another conflict between the organization and the Tajik government arose in September 2016, during the annual OSCE human rights conference in Warsaw. On the first day of the conference, about 20 Tajik citizens interrupted the session on Tajikistan, protesting the imprisonment of Tajik politicians and defenders from the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) and other opposition groups, which had taken place in the previous months. On 23 September, the representatives of the Tajik government participating in the meeting issued a statement, claiming: ‘Our Delegation took all accusations and intimadations during the meeting as well as outside with tolerance. But yesterday they crossed the red line’51 – and renounced further participation of the Tajik government in the OSCE human rights meetings. The media reported that following the incident, 50 relatives of activists from Warsaw were detained in Tajikistan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2016). At first sight, it seems that the OSCE decided to become an intruder in this case, by standing against human rights violations. However, an interviewed employee of the OSCE office in Tajikistan believes otherwise:

OSCE [conference organizers in Warsaw] did not consult the OSCE office in Tajikistan. The opposition [protesters] registered for the conference on behalf of a different organization, and even the conference organizers could not know [what was going to happen], because anyone who wishes to can register for the conference. Nothing was coordinated; the Tajikistan office was in an awkward situation.52

The OSCE office in Tajikistan remained silent following the incident, which is another indication that the organization did not intend to become an intruder.
From the perspective of employees of IOs, the Tajik government is turning IOs into intruders to distract the attention of its own population from its inability to deal with social and economic woes, including massive emigration flows, all-encompassing corruption, a broken justice system and low living standards, including the country’s remaining as the poorest country in the entire post-Soviet/post-communist bloc. One interviewee sarcastically argues:

Why should Western governments spy through IOs if they could [simply] give US$ 200 to any Tajik official to provide the desired information?! Corruption in Tajikistan reaches such levels that any secret can be revealed in exchange for money. With the rhetoric of foreign agents and spies the government is justifying its own existence [i.e. covering up its own shortcomings].53

The OSCE is thus an ‘intruder’ for two reasons. First, by promoting an alternative, democratic governance mechanism and advocating human rights and fair elections, the OSCE becomes an enemy and a threat to the regime’s survival. Second, the OSCE has become an artificially and easily created enemy, which along with other IOs and some Western embassies serves as a scapegoat for the instability in Tajikistan, instability which in reality is a result of decades of bad governance, lack of political pluralism, corruption and economic mismanagement.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to show that the 20-year history of international aid to Tajikistan is a story of multi-fold adaptations, in this case taking the example of the OSCE and post-Soviet Central Asia, as seen in the case of Tajikistan. Contrary to the assumptions which accompanied the IOs’ original arrival in Tajikistan in the early 1990s, foreign aid is a two-way process. Over the two decades since IOs appeared in Tajikistan, it seems that Tajikistan as a state may have socialized them towards maintaining the status quo more than they have socialized Tajikistan towards acceptance of the neoliberal world order. In the case of the OSCE as an IO, evidence suggests that Tajikistan has largely socialized it to become simultaneously a benefactor, an industry and an intruder, and in the end either largely ineffective or unwilling to seriously promote the lofty aims of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which remain the core ideals of the organization. Unlike in other countries in the region for years the organization managed to maintain its full-fledged mission mandate in Tajikistan, which allows it to be a political actor in this country. The question is, however, what was the price of maintaining the full mandate? The OSCE office in Tajikistan remained silent when in September 2016 the Tajik government declared the IRPT a terrorist organization and banned the party; when in June 2016 high-ranking officials of the IRPT were sentenced to jail terms of up to several years; and in May 2016, after the constitutional amendments which removed term limits for the current president, who is currently serving his fourth term. In this situation, does holding a large mandate equal being a relevant political player, a game-changer in the Tajik political scene? The answer is no.

The picture which emerges from this article is also an empirical contribution to academic and practical debates on the impact of IOs in post-Soviet or transition societies, or rather, explains why their role is so limited. Adaptations are a repeating motive in
the narratives about foreign assistance. The case study of the OSCE mission in Tajikistan demonstrates who is really an agent and who is a subject, or as Lewis’ study (2012) is aptly titled: ‘Who’s Socializing Whom?’ After the civil war, the OSCE remained in Tajikistan to assist the country towards a broadly conceived democratization. Yet, ironically, the state and not the OSCE turned out to be an agent in this interaction. The weak post-conflict Tajik state has made the OSCE, especially in the post-9/11 era, into its image. This in turn reveals something about the structure of international politics and involves the significance or lack thereof that small non-petrol-rich Central Asian states, such as Tajikistan, have in the eyes of key European and North American powers. In the post-9/11 era, regardless of any neoliberal rhetoric, the de facto emphasis of influential Western powers has been on stability and maintenance of the status quo rather than democratization.

Does Tajikistan realistically need such an OSCE? A former employee of the OSCE mission in Tajikistan has doubts about this high-portfolio IO in its present arrangement in the country. In response to the question of whether the OSCE is needed in Tajikistan, the interviewee said:

From a liberal, humanitarian, feminist, objective perspective the answer is no. The ‘no’ has a qualifier, however. Tajikistan does not need the OSCE as it is today, as a hypocritical entity which fails to implement its own avowed liberal norms and commitments. From this perspective it is better that the OSCE leave or substantially reduce its financial presence in the country so that genuine civil society and voices can begin to function without the drug of finances and the disease of projects.55

Four decades on, the founding act of the OSCE, the Helsinki Final Act, remains a noble document. However, its implementation requires the public and genuine civil society of the OSCE participating states, whether in North America, the EU or Central Asia, to be engaged and demand results from their respective governments and the organization as a whole. The OSCE needs to reform itself, including its practical functions in its field operations in Central Asia, otherwise it will continue its pace towards irrelevancy.

Notes

1. The Tajik civil war (1992–97) involved two blocks of the Islamist-dominated United Tajik Opposition versus the post- or neo-Soviet pro-governmental forces, comprising four regional groups: the opposition was dominated by ethno-regional Gharmis and Pamiris, who stood up against government forces dominated by Leninabadis and Kulobis.
4. Net official development assistance includes both grants from official agencies and disbursements of loans made on concessional terms.
5. OSCE Permanent Council, Decision No. 500, 31 October 2002.
7. OSCE Permanent Council, Decision No. 1158, 30 December 2014.
8. OSCE Permanent Council, Decision No. 1196, 31 December 2015.
9. Lancaster gives a 70-year history of aid, arguing that after WWII, international aid was used by the US not only to bolster the economies of Turkey and Greece but also to pull them over to the Western side in the face of increasing pressures from the Soviet bloc.
10. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE, 31 July 2014. As a side note, the interviewee refers to the dispute between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan concerning a planned hydroelectric power plant in Roghun on the Vaksh River in Tajikistan. The project has drawn complaints
from the Uzbek side, which fears that the power station will have a negative impact on its water resources and cotton crops. And though the World Bank, as an IO, has recently approved Tajikistan’s plan to build the Roghun hydroelectric power plant and its associated potentially record-breaking 335-metre-high dam, Uzbekistan’s opposition and lack of international investment in the needed capital (as much as US$ 5 billion) have put a temporary hold on construction (Forss 2014).

12. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 31 July 2014.
14. Ibid.
15. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 18 July 2014.
16. Interview with a person working for an environmental international NGO, 19 July 2014.
17. It is also noteworthy that the government confiscated the mission’s new premises from a private owner soon after the same owner was arrested, and later tried and imprisoned in 2009 (interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014).
18. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014.
19. Interview with a person working for a NGO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 18 August 2014.
21. Interview with a person working for an IO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 1 August 2014.
22. Interview with a person working for an IO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 31 July 2014.
23. Interview with an accountant living in Dushanbe, 29 July 2014.
24. Interview with a worker in a centre which receives grants from the OSCE, 27 July 2014.
25. Expatriate OSCE employees working in Central Asia, for example, receive an estimated €150–200/day, or €4500–6000/month, in per diem or living allowance from the OSCE. This exorbitant amount is in most cases on top of what their individual government pays the seconded employee as salary base. For OSCE workers coming from the Scandinavian countries, for example, the monthly salary and living allowance is thought to be in the range of €15,000–18,000/month, or €180,000–240,000/year (interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014).
26. Interview with a person working for an IO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 1 August 2014.
27. Ibid.
28. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014.
29. Interview with a person working for an IO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 1 August 2014.
30. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan and other IOs, 31 July 2014.
31. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014.
32. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 31 July 2014.
33. For literature which problematizes knowledge production by IOs and makes a strong case against idealizing the role of international experts, see Boswell (2009); Broome and Seabrooke (2012); Autesserre (2014).
34. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan and other IOs, 31 July 2014.
35. A reviewer provided a negative comment on the critical stance of this article towards income-generating activities, claiming that this focus on entrepreneurship ‘is because the country is facing a major economic crisis and the return of labour migrants from Russia. This does require an economic response that IOs are willing to support. [It] makes sense and does not in any way represent a misjudgement or a wrong assessment.’ I recognize this point of view (and the noble intentions of donors); however, at the same time, I believe that it is useful to question this approach and study more carefully whether the boom in income-generating communities and microfinance really leads to sustainable socio-economic development. Until now
there has been no work on Tajikistan which would support this claim. See e.g. the criticism of local neoliberalism in Bangladesh by Sanyal (1991) and in East Asia by Bateman (2010).

36. Interview with a person working for an IO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 1 August 2014.

37. The lack of sufficient oversight of the civil society by donors is nothing new and dates back to the civil war, when NGOs learned how to make a profit from international aid. A pensioner from the north of Tajikistan says about distribution of humanitarian aid, mostly flour, cooking oil and sugar during that period: ‘They [IOs] would keep 40% of the donated humanitarian goods for themselves and their relatives, distribute another 40%, and sell the last 20% for cash’ (interview, Istaravshan, 27 July 2014).

38. Interview with a person working for an NGO focusing on vulnerable groups in society, 18 August 2014.

39. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014.

40. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 18 July 2014.

41. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan and other IOs, 31 July 2014.

42. Ibid.

43. Interview with an employee of an educational foreign government agency, 1 August 2014.

44. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 31 July 2014.

45. Interview with a former employee of a ministry, 9 July 2014.

46. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 18 July 2014.

47. Ibid.

48. Interview with a lawyer from an IO helping vulnerable groups in society, 18 July 2014.

49. Interview with a former employee of a ministry, 9 July 2014.

50. Ibid.

51. Statement by the Delegation of the Republic of Tajikistan at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting.

52. Interview with an employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 12 December 2016.

53. Interview with a person working for an IO helping vulnerable groups in society, 1 August 2014.


55. Interview with a former employee of the OSCE in Tajikistan, 26 December 2014.

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