

“The OSCE Academy is here to work for the region”, interview with Pal Dunay, Director of the OSCE Academy, Bishkek

With forty percent of the Central Asian population being under the age of twenty-five, education remains a priority for the region. Many local universities face problems with corruption, censorship and underfunding. Some institutions, such as Nazabayev University, OSCE Academy and University of Central Asia, are working to raise standards. This month Eurasian Dialogue spoke with Pal Dunay, director of the OSCE Academy. The academy has established itself as a leading provider of higher education in Central Asia. Its alumni have gone on to top positions in government, business and civil society. In this interview, Dunay discusses some of the challenges the academy has faced and its many achievements during its brief history.



Dr Pal Dunay

credit OSCE Academy

What motivated the OSCE to establish an academy in Central Asia? And why Bishkek ?

As often in such cases, different factors co-existed and helped establishing the OSCE Academy. First of all, Kyrgyzstan took the initiative to start an OSCE Academy at the beginning of the century. It was a national initiative and the idea, as far as the prospective students and audience, was also national. However, the OSCE was understandably not very excited about it. The Secretariat had a “counter-

initiative” and expressed its view that it would positively consider the idea and hoped for support of the participating states, if it were a regional initiative. At about the same time, Central Asia has gained in importance and attracted more attention than ever. This was due to 9/11 and its aftermath. Three Central Asian states are neighbours of Afghanistan while also participating states of the OSCE.

Kyrgyzstan as host of the Academy certainly had a comparative advantage beyond being the state that took the initiative. It was certainly the most democratic state in the region where freedom of speech faced no particular limitation. It was a major advantage.

However, we need to consider as well whether democracy has been so beneficial to the country as it should. As we know, Kyrgyzstan went through two major upheavals in 2005 and 2010, respectively and it is doubtful whether longer term stability will be retained. Democracy, as a condition, must be accompanied by good governance in order people would be convinced about the superiority and the advantages of a democratic system.

How does the Academy contribute to the OSCE's goal of improving regional security?

The OSCE Academy, similarly to other training and educational institutions, contributes to the improvement of regional security indirectly and in the long run. This certainly means that it is difficult to measure the OSCE Academy's contribution. However, in light of more than a decade of experience we may report on preliminary results. We should rather speak about the potential contribution of the Academy than about the direct impact of our work.

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However, if we take a look to what the Academy does, it is clear that its contribution is increasingly noticeable. The Academy has two MA programmes, one on International Politics and Security and another one in Economic Governance and Development. The former is in its eleventh year, the latter is in its third year. A young generation of intellectuals is studying at our courses.

Many of them arrive to the Academy directly after their BA studies, whereas some arrive with a few years of professional experience. They come from six countries, five Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union and Afghanistan. The interactions in the class, including lots of exchanges on matters related to the region help the students understand the underlying assumptions behind their thinking that has a certain confidence-building effect. Working in a multi-national environment contributes to mutual understanding and thus prepares our students for their professional life.

In addition to the MA courses the Academy conducts several shorter demand-driven executive courses both in Bishkek and in other places in Central Asia. They address contemporary journalism, conflict sensitive development and many others. Some of them are conducted in English, some in Russian.

Last, but not least, the Academy conducts research and publishes a Policy Brief series both electronically and in hard copy. It would be preferable to have a higher research profile but it depends partly on in-house human resources.

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Central Asia has a range of universities and higher education institutions. What makes the OSCE Academy so special?

Indeed, Central Asia has many universities, including some with international outreach. However, the OSCE Academy is different in various senses and if you take the elements together we are indeed unique. First of all, we are regional. We try to attract approximately the same number of students from six Central Asian states. We are also very glad if some students arrive with a few years of experience in government, the NGO sector or journalism. This fact enriches the exchanges. The teaching faculty is international. We share resources

with some other institutions as except for the deputy director and me the teaching faculty is not full time employed by the Academy. We do not teach undergraduate students, we only have post-graduate courses. I do not think I should provoke the environment that surrounds us and I hope – and in a few cases also know – we are not unique with this in the entire region but we are uncorrupted and we cannot be corrupted. Hence, we offer achievement on merit. We tell the students very early that the teaching process will be demanding but we hope that they will regard it a life-changing experience. Fortunately, the labour market recognizes this and our graduates find their place in the job market relatively easily.

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You have started your term as Director of the OSCE Academy 6 months ago. What were your motivations to take this position and what are your ambitions for the Academy?

Although I have been in Bishkek in my current position only for six months, I am not a newcomer to the Academy and Bishkek. As my former workplace was a major contributor to the Academy and the contribution was in-kind, I had the privilege to teach at the Academy for at least a week ever since its inception. I was in Bishkek already when the first so-called trial course started more than a decade ago. Once I was even asked by then Director of the Academy to write an assessment on the MA programme. In sum, many of my current colleagues have known me and I have known them when I applied for the position. So I feel like an insider – outsider. It is also important to mention that those who were in charge of the OSCE Academy in the last more than ten years, Dr. Tim Epkenhans, Dr. Maxim Ryabkov as directors taken together for ten years and Mr. Shairbek Juraev as acting director for seven months during the selection process of the new director have done an incredible job. Without their commitment and dedication the Academy would not be what it is.

In fact, I am somewhat older than the former directors. They were in their thirties when they started to work at the Academy whereas I am in my fifties. At my age, I think many people would consider where and how to make a useful contribution and face challenges. When I started my professional career more than thirty years ago, I decided that I would never stay at a workplace for the reason of pay. Even though responsibility for a family makes this consideration more complex, I feel fortunate that I did not have to make a compromise when I left the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) where I worked for a total of fifteen years (1996-2004, 2007-2014) that I still often miss, and could join the Academy. My family that stayed in Budapest has supported my choice and I am indebted to them for their support.

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Last, but not least, I am Hungarian. I come from a country that has valuable experience in socio-economic and political transformation. Sharing this experience, including the down-

sides and the doubts is essential and may help the understanding of those students that we teach here in Bishkek. Hungary is also a country that is giving evidence now that democratic transformation is a two way street. People in Central Asia should learn that democratic transformation has a high price and democracy as a catchword without good governance is a hollow shell.

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As far as my ambitions are concerned: I am not a revolutionary who believes that if I change many things it will get definitely better. I have seen institutions weakened if not ruined by constant often *l'art pour l'art* change. So continuity, particularly in the case of such a successful institution as the Academy is absolutely essential. I could in a few cases imagine that some colleagues would work on higher quality more often take the initiative rather than waiting the Academy's management to do it. However, I have to measure these factors against a very good working atmosphere. It is essential to have excellent atmosphere at the Academy as a

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workplace. The monthly salaries are a bit higher than the local salaries in Kyrgyzstan but not particularly competitive when compared internationally will not keep my colleagues at the OSCE Academy. It is the shared common purpose and good human relations that should contribute to the value of working with us. I try to work in a motivating environment, have a fair assessment of the work and make my colleagues

understand that we can also improve together. The Academy has a liberal internal working environment and it should be retained. However, liberalism at a workplace cannot mean that people work hard if they feel like...

I would like to see the Academy to flourish in the next few years. I would like to achieve that the two MA courses would be equally well established and also that the short executive courses follow the “customer demand” in the region. For me it is also essential that the OSCE Academy should be truly regional. Every Central Asian state should feel that the Academy is here to work for the region. Students should also join our courses from each of the six countries and demand should again be on the rise. In addition, we would like to have a few students join our courses from other countries as their valuable experience would enrich the mutual learning process. This has been the case in the past. We used to have students (one or two every year) from Armenia, China, Germany, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, and the U.S. I think a few participants preferably with some professional working experience among others from the post-Soviet space would contribute to realizing our objective.

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I would like the OSCE Academy to be a platform where thinking about Central Asia concentrates. I would like to attract young professionals to join us and teach for a semester or an academic year and some of the best professionals to come and teach a module. My predecessors were successful with this and I hope to follow their footsteps.

It would be great to have more and higher quality policy-oriented research at the Academy and contribute also to those publications that are disseminated widest. The Academy should host Ph.D. students working on Central Asian matters for their research year. They should also contribute a little to the courses and consult the students in their areas of expertise.

What have been your experiences during these first sixth months?

As I have mentioned, I had a certain idea of the Academy when I was selected. Of course, there are details of which I was not aware. However, I have known it is a valuable institution, has an excellent and dedicated staff, had honest professionals leading it to successes. My experience has underlined my assumptions. I have also found a supportive and friendly environment in the local international community. Diplomats at certain embassies want the Academy to succeed. The OSCE Centre, as I have mentioned, is enormously helpful.



The OSCE Academy building in Bishkek

credit OSCE Academy

However, I have also seen that on the current human and financial resources the Academy is at the limit. There is not much to achieve. I have also seen how some social conditions affect the OSCE Academy. My colleagues have family responsibility and despite their dedication they can hardly be loaded with work further. Most of them are wives and mothers and I feel that the Central Asian family structure does not give them the freedom to work extra hours. In Geneva and in Stockholm (where I was working between 2004 and 2007), parents shared the responsibility. Here it is more complex.

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I have also noticed that intra-regional relations and the external attention to Central Asia are indispensable for the Academy. It is important that the Central Asian states would not only live next to each other but would also gradually form a region. This does not happen now. The fact that ISAF is leaving Afghanistan and there is generally less international attention to the region must not result in vanishing attention to the region. Central Asia must not be forgotten. If it becomes a lost region it will export insecurity that can already be seen when Islamic radicals with Central Asian passports show up in certain crisis zones of the world.

There have been several regime changes in Kyrgyzstan the twelve years that the OSCE Academy has been open. How did that affect it?

The fact Kyrgyzstan had two major upheavals had some effect on the OSCE Academy. However, and fortunately, the negative impact remained limited and temporary. I understand why there were fewer students at our courses from Uzbekistan after the Osh events of 2010 than before. Now, we have no such problems and hope that the expression of political will of the people of Kyrgyzstan will take forms that do not result in repeated tremors. However, the fact there is less than desirable regional cooperation in Central Asia has positive effect on the Academy as well. It may sound strange or even absurd, but we have a more important role to play in contributing to the building of this region by our somewhat special means when regional cooperation remains in the waiting.

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Dr Pal Dunay has been the Director of the OSCE Academy since May 2014. Before joining the OSCE Academy, since 1996 Dr Dunay led the International Training Course in Security Policy at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, with the exception of 2004-2007, when he worked as Senior Researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). His experience includes directing the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, heading the Security Policy Department of the Hungarian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and teaching at the International Law Department of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. Pal Dunay holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Budapest University of Economics.