

The seat of the OSCE

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Until 1990, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) consisted of a process of sporadic multilateral negotiations without any headquarters or permanent secretariat. The host country of each stage of the Conference itself, and then of each subsequent meeting, appointed an ad hoc Executive Secretary, who was responsible for organising services for meetings, recruiting staff and dealing with financial matters.

The 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe set in motion the gradual institutionalisation of the CSCE, although it made provision for considerable decentralisation and flexibility in its structures. The choice of several new ‘seats’ symbolises the geographical dimension of the new Europe: the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) was allocated to **Vienna**, the Office for Free Elections (OFE) which, in 1992, became the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), went to **Warsaw**, while **Prague** was chosen as the location of the Secretariat, in honour of Václav Havel. In the same spirit of geographical distribution, the OSCE specialist and supporting institutions created later were assigned to different capital cities: the High Commissioner on National Minorities went to **The Hague**, the Secretariat of the Parliamentary Assembly to **Copenhagen** and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to **Vienna**.

However, the fact that the Secretariat in **Vienna**, as the permanent administrative structure, has gradually grown in size, and the fact that the weekly meetings of the Permanent Council are held at the Hofburg Imperial Palace, also in Vienna, ensure that the Austrian capital plays a central administrative, financial and even diplomatic role in the region covered by the OSCE.

The Secretariat, initially set up in Prague as a reduced support service catering for the administrative and documentation needs of the political consultation bodies, in particular the Council and the Committee of Senior Officials, soon found that its capacity was overwhelmed. In 1992, therefore, the CSCE Council decided that, instead of giving the existing Secretariat more resources, it would create another one in Vienna, which already housed the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) and the only permanent political body of the OSCE, consisting of accredited ambassadors to the Austrian capital, namely the Permanent Committee which, in 1994, became the Permanent Council. Moreover, the role of the Vienna Secretariat has been strengthened by the creation of the new post of Secretary-General, who now heads the CPC and also the ‘office’ in Prague.

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