The OSCE and the conflict in Chechnya

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1. The conflict in Chechnya

The Russian military campaign against the rebels in Chechnya has given rise to fierce protests all over the world because of its brutal character, affecting the lives of many innocent civilians. Although the Russians claimed a military victory over the rebels after the bloody conquest of the Chechen capital Grozny, reality proves to be different. The rebels suffered major losses, but were able to commence a guerilla campaign against the Russians all over the territory of the Chechen republic. There is an imminent threat that they will expand the conflict outside the borders of Chechnya, in particular affecting neighbouring Dagestan, but also the territory of Georgia.

The Chechen conflict has been high on the OSCE agenda since the beginning of the military campaign in the autumn of last year. It became a major obstacle during the OSCE Summit meeting which was held in Istanbul on 18 and 19 November. Although the Russians claimed the conflict was an exclusively 'internal affair', they could not ward off an intensive debate about the conflict that many OSCE States consider to be a conflict in which the Russians make use of disproportional violence in their legitimate fight against Chechen terrorism. Demands by OSCE bodies to provide access to the war zone to OSCE missions in order to check increasingly consistent reports about war crimes and crimes against humanity were for a long time rejected by the Russian authorities.

During the Istanbul Summit, strong words were used to describe the international disapproval of the nature of the Russian military campaign. The presidents of both Estonia and Latvia demonstratively refused to attend the summit as a clear sign of their disapproval of the OSCE's poor performance in this conflict, but the prime ministers of both these Baltic countries did make use of the opportunity to condemn the Russian policy in clear terms. Both prime ministers, Mart Laar and Andris Skele, expressed their countries' moral and political objections to Russia's indiscriminate use of force against the Chechen population. Laar described the war as a 'manifestation of racism' and an unacceptable case of 'demonizing an entire people'. Warning against the dangerous spillover potential of the war, Laar dismissed Russia's claim that it is combating terrorism when in fact it attacks the civilian population. By that logic, he said, hijacked airliners and their passengers would be deliberately blown up as a method of combating terrorist hijackers. Without questioning Russia's territorial integrity, both prime ministers urged Moscow to start negotiations concerning a
political solution to the conflict and to accept international assistance, including the OSCE's, towards that end.

The Chechen conflict even threatened that the Istanbul Summit would end in an outright failure, as the Russian President Boris Yeltsin vehemently rejected any Western criticism of the Russian crackdown on the Chechens. After his unexpectedly quick departure from the summit, however, a major 'breakthrough' was achieved, when the then Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov accepted a compromise that allowed the OSCE's involvement in finding solutions to the conflict. Although the compromise was largely seen as a political manoeuvre without too much substance, it enabled a 'positive' outcome to result from the summit, including the adoption of some extensive documents relating to political-military issues: the European Security Charter and an amendment to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty). The sceptics concerning the Russian 'concessions' appeared to be correct: the Istanbul summit did not have any impact on the continuation of the brutal military campaign in Chechnya.

Actually, subsequent events made it abundantly clear that Moscow was not willing to live up to its promises at the Istanbul Summit. Although the then Chairman-in-Office Knut Vollebaek was finally invited to visit Moscow at the end of November, his efforts to gain Russian approval for an OSCE mission to Chechnya totally failed. Moreover, Ivanov made it abundantly clear that he did not see any role for the OSCE to mediate in the Chechen conflict.

Although the OSCE has not been able to significantly alter the Russian campaign, the organization took some other measures to constrain the conflict. One of the measures, taken by the OSCE Permanent Council in December, was to expand the mandate of the OSCE Mission in Georgia to include observation of the border between the Chechen Republic of the Russian Federation and Georgia. By providing detailed information on the movements and events around the border, the OSCE is seeking to diffuse possible tensions. For this reason, the OSCE opened another branch office in a small town close to the Chechen-Georgian border. In April, the Permanent Council decided to strengthen the OSCE Border monitoring operation in Georgia. The decision came in response to the need for increased monitoring in the summer period, when a large number of passes will again be accessible. The decision aims to 'strengthen the credibility as well as the security' of the border monitoring operation, the mandate of which was prolonged until 15 November 2000. The Permanent Council also decided to increase the size of its mission up to 42 international personnel. The decision appears to be very appropriate in particular in the light of Russian allegations that the Chechens use Georgian territory in order to ship weapons to the war zone.

After the claim of a military 'victory' by the Russians in the spring, it became clear that reality was somewhat different: the increasing number of Russian casualties as a result of the Chechen guerilla attacks indicated that the Russian military victory was paper-thin. It even led to the Russian willingness to commence talks about a political solution. One of the outcomes is that the OSCE received the approval to establish a new mission in Chechnya, for which the preparations are now under way.