OSCE CHRONICLE

The OSCE and the War against Terror

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1. The War against Terror
The unimaginable acts of terror against the United States on the 11th of September have drastically changed the world, at least for the time being. Although the OSCE has hardly been mentioned in the aftermath of these events and the subsequent war being waged by the US and its allies against Afghanistan and its ‘guest’ Osama bin Laden with his terrorist Al Qaida network, the developments have nevertheless deeply affected the OSCE. This is not only related to the functioning of the organization itself, but also because of the political consequences for many of the problems which the OSCE is dealing with.

It comes as no surprise of course, that the OSCE with its 55 participating states was one of the voices around the world condemning the terrorist acts against the US in the strongest possible terms. One month later, on the 11th of October, the OSCE Permanent Council also expressed strong support for the military actions by the US against Afghanistan and its ‘guest’. In its unanimously adopted statement the PC declared its support for the US’ and other states’ rights to individual and collective self-defence following armed attacks, in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter. The Council also reaffirmed ‘the obligation to prevent and suppress terrorism and to hold States that support terrorists accountable for their actions’.

It goes without saying that the unprecedented terrorist acts against the US has now also placed the problem of terrorism on top of the OSCE agenda. That is reflected, among other things, in the establishment of a special Working Group on Terrorism that has been charged with the drafting of an OSCE statement and action plan on counter-terrorism which should be adopted at the Bucharest meeting of the Ministerial Council in December 2001.

This does not mean, of course, that terrorism has not been on the OSCE agenda before. In particular the Central Asian member states of the OSCE have raised this problem time and again in OSCE meetings and the organization has organized several seminars to address this problem. It has been these states in particular that have consistently felt the destabilising influence of the neighbouring Taliban regime. The clearest sign of this has been the military incursions by Islamic extremists in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the past two years. These

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extremists have come from Afghanistan, where they apparently had their base, receiving training in the camps of the Osama bin Laden network. It is these same states which now find themselves in the spotlight of the world attention. The US-led global alliance against terrorism with Afghanistan as its first target suddenly made the Central Asian OSCE states vital security interest for the USA. The former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan with its notorious human rights record over the past few years has now become overnight a close ally of the US. It has offered the Americans military bases for the deployment of US troops and equipment.

The political climate between the Americans and the Russians also changed dramatically with direct consequences for the OSCE. Until recently, it was still fully unclear whether the organization would be able to overcome the crisis in which it found itself, when the Russians last year decided to no longer accept the, in their view, one-sided OSCE treatment of problems in the Central and East European countries. The Russian Federation demanded substantive changes in the functioning of the organization which should adopt a more balanced approach, for instance also allowing the discussion of the problems in Western countries. At the end of 2000 this resulted in the failure of the Vienna meeting of the Ministerial Council which, for the first time in its history, was not able to adopt a concluding statement. The prospects for the next ministerial in Bucharest in December this year also looked gloomy. Until September there were few signs that the Russians and the leading Western countries were approaching a compromise on the main problems that were keeping them divided. However, the newly-found ‘understanding’ by the US for the Russian problems has considerably changed the political map. The US started to mitigate its criticism of the often brutal Russian military campaign against the Chechen terrorists and the Russians started to show some willingness to compromise on the American demand to amend the 1972 ABM treaty in order to allow the US to move forward with its plans for an anti-missile defence shield. Plans that to date have met fierce Russian opposition.

The war against terrorism affected many other issues on the OSCE agenda as well. One factor to be mentioned in this context is the fact that the American interest shifted completely to the anti-terrorism campaign; and Central Asia, therefore, became an area of vital US interest. That resulted in a loss of American interest in developments in other parts of the OSCE region. The three South Caucasian states, for instance, felt this immediately. In this way the Russians more or less received a free hand to deal with their ‘difficult’ neighbour Georgia which they have always accused of harbouring Chechen rebels. Although the Georgian government is not charged with actively helping the Chechen rebels, its lack of control over major parts of its territory and people offered certain groups distinct possibilities for activities that the RF strongly opposes. Apparently groups of Chechen rebels were able to enter Georgian territory and to liaise with Georgian paramilitary groupings, resulting in renewed violence with the breakaway Republic of Abkhazia. In the midst of the heightened tensions a UN helicopter with military monitors was shot down, followed by military attacks on the