The OSCE and internal displacement: A new momentum

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I. Introduction
Internal displacement constitutes one of the most pressing human dimension concerns in the OSCE area. The region hosts an estimated three million people who have been forcibly displaced within their own countries by conflicts, generalised violence or human rights violations. This number represents more than ten percent of the world’s 25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Thirteen of the 55 OSCE countries are affected by internal displacement: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Georgia, Macedonia, Moldova, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

The OSCE is well placed to address the problem. It has a strong mandate in the fields of conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation, enabling it to deal with all phases of conflict-induced displacement. Through its comprehensive approach to security — linking politico-military, human rights and economic aspects — the OSCE has the expertise necessary to tackle a phenomenon that cuts across all three dimensions. With its broad membership, comprizing all countries affected by internal displacement in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the OSCE can address displacement situations, and in particular the conflicts that caused them, from a regional perspective. Moreover, through its field missions and institutions, the OSCE is in a position to monitor internal displacement and work directly with governments, civil society and IDPs on the ground.

Despite the scope of the problem in the region and the OSCE’s obvious potential to address it, the Organization has not integrated internal displacement in a systematic and coherent manner into its programmes and activities. However, the OSCE Ministerial Council decision in December 2003 to formally acknowledge a set of international standards relating to internal displacement appears to have ended a long political deadlock and may mark the beginning of a stronger involvement of the Organization in the issue.

This article outlines current IDP-related trends and developments in the region, analyses the OSCE’s current responses to internal displacement and identifies areas where the Organization could strengthen its role.

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II. Internal displacement in the OSCE area: current trends and developments

The number of IDPs in the OSCE region reached an initial peak in the first half of the 1990s as a result of the conflict in Turkey’s south-east, and fighting in the Balkans and the Caucasus in the wake of the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. The more recent armed conflicts in Chechnya (1994-1996 and since 1999), Kosovo (1999) and Macedonia (2001) have produced additional waves of large-scale displacement. Since 2001 the number of IDPs in the region has been slowly declining, mainly due to the settlement of the conflict in Macedonia and an increase in the return figures in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Chechnya.2

Deceptive decrease

The decrease of Europe’s IDP population is somewhat deceptive, however, in that the figures disguise the fact that often return conditions do not reflect durable solutions for the returnees. After returning home, many IDPs, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina or Croatia, are faced with security threats, lack of economic opportunities or discriminatory practices, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, for them to re-establish their lives in a sustainable way. In the Russian Federation there are reports of IDPs being pressured by the authorities to return to Chechnya although the security situation in the republic does not allow for safe returns.

Continued displacement

Violence, human rights violations and armed conflicts still generate new displacement in the region, albeit on a lesser scale than during previous years. The conflict in Chechnya, for example, often leaves civilians no other choice but to flee, at least temporarily, from their homes. In Kosovo, members of ethnic minority communities, particularly Serbs and Roma, continue to leave the province. Among the small number of returnees are many who are forced into renewed displacement by the continuosly hostile environment. In Turkmenistan, the government uses forced displacement as a punitive measure against ethnic minorities perceived as being disloyal to the government, as well as against dissidents and their families.

Although active fighting has long ended in most of the conflicts that caused internal displacement, the return of IDPs to their places of origin remains the exception, and protracted, long-term displacement has become characteristic for the OSCE area. A significant portion of the region’s IDPs have been displaced for a decade or longer. In eight out of the 13 countries affected by internal displacement, including Azerbaijan, Georgia and Serbia and Montenegro,

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2 This chapter is based on the introduction to Protecting internally displaced persons in the OSCE area: A neglected commitment, NRC Global IDP Project, Geneva, October 2003 (http://www.idpproject.org/regions/Europe/Overview_OSCE_IDP_report.pdf). For detailed country profiles and all references, see the NRC’s IDP database at www.idpproject.org.

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