The 11th meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council: Political deadlock and institutional change

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In the ritual of the OSCE, the annual meeting of the Ministerial Council provides a rare opportunity for a traditionally low-profile organization to highlight its political visibility at the international level — all the more so considering that the participating States have not gathered at Summit level since 1999. It also prompts the OSCE to assess the work achieved under the guidance of its Chairmanship during a full calendar year. From this dual perspective, the 11th meeting of the Ministerial Council (Maastricht, 1-2 December 2003) cannot be labelled as a completely successful event since it has provided the image of an OSCE victim of a renewed political assault from the Putin administration and crippled by its own iron law of consensus despite all the diplomatic skills deployed by an able Dutch Chairmanship. Be this as it may, the Maastricht results can be summarized as such: a breakdown of consensus on regional conflicts, limited consensus on structural reform issues and general consensus on the strengthening of the three dimensions of the OSCE.

The Putin administration strikes again: Breakdown of consensus on regional conflicts

Similar to what happened during the Vienna Ministerial Council (2000), the Ministers gathered in Maastricht failed to agree on a general political declaration and, more importantly, a declaration on regional conflicts and issues. They only issued a ‘Statement on South-Eastern Europe as a Region of Co-operation’ highlighting the positive development taking place in that region. The breakdown of consensus was provoked by the Russian Federation reacting, inter alia, to the OSCE non-endorsement of a new Moscow proposal on the resolution of the Transdnistrian conflict by a means of a federal scheme. At the same time, Moscow objected to any linkage of its Istanbul military commitments (withdrawal of troops and armaments from Moldova and the elimination of military bases in Georgia) with the entry into force of the adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) and rejected provisions confirming its resolve to continue complying with these commitments.

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4 Moscow’s opposition to a Ministerial text on regional conflicts prompted Moldova and
It is worth recalling that up to Maastricht, the NATO and European Union member States used to demonstrate a great deal of complacency vis-à-vis Moscow’s hegemonic designs in Moldova and Georgia. They constantly paid formal tribute to the ‘mediation’ efforts undertaken by Russia for solving the Transdniestrian and South Ossetian conflicts — thereby condoning biased and useless mediation processes taking place under the aegis of the OSCE. The West even went so far as to endorse, within the OSCE, a Moscow-originated compromise (the so-called Kiev Protocol of 2002) whose implementation would have put at risk Moldova’s very future as an independent sovereign State. As Vladimir Socor put it, the project was an ‘insult’ to democracy as well as to federalism — since it would have legalized a hitherto unrecognized mafia-type regime, attributed to the leadership of that communist regime (basically composed of Russian citizens) a constitutional right to veto Moldova’s moves towards the European Union and transformed Moldova into a de facto Russian protectorate.

Furthermore, the Western States never dare to condemn Moscow’s procrastination in complying with the Istanbul military commitments and, as a consequence, actually condoned the persistence of a Russian military presence in both Moldova and Georgia against the will of the hosting states. At the Porto Ministerial Council meeting (2002), they only noted Russia’s intention to achieve withdrawal from Moldova, ‘provided necessary conditions are in place’, by 31 December 2003 — and forced the government of Moldova to swallow the bitter pill. As regards Georgia, they only expressed support for ‘the desire of the parties to complete negotiations regarding the duration and modalities of the functioning of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki and the Russian military facilities within the territory of Georgia’. Such complacency was motivated by the dual concern of preserving the anti-terrorist strategic partnership established with Moscow since 9/11 and ensuring the anchoring of an increasing reluctant Russia to the OSCE.

In 2003, the Putin administration began to display such external assertiveness (together with a growing internal authoritarianism) that it no longer seemed to want to hide its hegemonic designs in Moldova and Georgia. In view of accelerating its hold on Moldova, it hammered out — without consultation with the OSCE, the European Union or the United States — a new version of the federalization scheme providing for Russia’s exclusive control on Moldova: the