The OSCE Mission to Georgia (1992-2004): The failing art of half-hearted measures

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Created in November 1992, the Long-Term Mission to Georgia represents the second oldest of the OSCE’s field missions presently still active, after the Spillover Mission to Skopje whose establishment took place in August of the same year. Under the OSCE 2004 unified budget, it has 22,271,900 EUROS at its disposal which ranks it just below the Mission to Kosovo (42,661,500 EUROS). Initially set up with an authorized strength of 8 international staff, it presently includes over a hundred such agents. The Mission to Georgia was not established for the purpose of preventive diplomacy or post-conflict rehabilitation (functions for which the OSCE has real credentials), but to engage in what the Organization is obviously least fit: conflict resolution, or peace-making in United Nations parlance. The Mission’s basic aim is to contribute to the settlement of the issue of South Ossetia, one of the two territorial secessions confronting Georgia (the other having taken place in Abkhazia, a case under the jurisdiction of the United Nations). South Ossetia belongs to the category of so-called ‘frozen conflicts’. At the OSCE, the concept also refers to Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan) and Transdniestria (Moldova). In all three cases, the armed conflict ended with territorial secession, the defeat of the central authorities being largely due to the support provided by a third party — Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia in Moldova and Georgia. The breakaway regions proclaimed themselves as sovereign States, but did not gain any international recognition. Their leadership argued that the respective populations did not constitute ethnic minorities, but peoples entitled to exercise the right of self-determination. Such conflicts are to be considered ‘frozen’ because they have led to situations where a military demarcation line established by a cease-fire (achieved by Russia) has become a de facto border, while all efforts towards political settlement have remained unsuccessful. Although entrenched in a low level of violence, frozen conflicts could — to the extent that the armed option remains a temptation for the central State — be reactivated.

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2 As regards Abkhazia, Georgia solicited the intervention of the UN and not of the OSCE, presumably because the latter’s reaction to the South Ossetian case has been characterized by slowness and timidity.
3 The concept of ‘frozen conflicts’ appeared in § 3 of the Summary Conclusions to a 1998 Reinforced Meeting held by the Permanent Council on regional issues (CIO.GAL/75/98 of 2 November 1998). In 1999, Ambassador John M. Evans, the Head of Mission to Moldova, also used the concept in his ultimate speech to the Permanent Council (PC.FR/17/99 of 21 June 1999).
4 For more details on the category of frozen conflicts, see this author’s ‘The Role of the OSCE
Enlarged on several occasions between 1994 and 2002, the mandate of the Mission to Georgia is a complex one. It includes the facilitation of negotiations on the definition of South Ossetia’s statute, the monitoring of the Russian-led military forces supervising the 1992 cease-fire in the breakaway region, the observation of Georgia’s borders with Russia (at the intersection with Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan), the consolidation of democracy in the whole of Georgia and, finally, the support of United Nations’ efforts as regards conflict resolution in the equally frozen conflict in Abkhazia. After some 12 years of activities, the Mission’s balance sheet is far from glorious. Its failing grade accounts for an OSCE systematic policy of half-hearted measures, viz. decisions appropriate in essence, but whose execution is not seriously supported. Given the limited space which is available, the present analysis will only address conflict resolution, border observation and military issues, as well as (more briefly) democratization.

Conflict resolution: ‘Potemkin’ — type mediation under the aegis of the OSCE

When Georgia proclaimed its independence from the USSR on 9 April 1991, its 5.4 million population included some 30% of ethnic minorities primarily concentrated in three administrative entities created by the Soviet power for the purpose of neutralizing both Georgian and non-Georgian nationalism: the Autonomous Republics of Azaria and Abkhazia, as well as the Autonomous Region (oblast) of South Ossetia. Under the leadership of an ultra-nationalist President (Zviad Gamsakhurdia), Georgia sought to reaffirm its identity at the expense of the domestic ethnic minority communities. The provocative posture and moves adopted by the Georgian leadership, who ruled out dialogue and accused the minorities of collusion with Moscow, fuelled claims which were hitherto more or less acute in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.5 After civil wars accompanied by ethnic cleansing, the two entities ultimately seceded from Georgia, respectively on 19 January and 23 July 1992.6

It is worth recalling that the Soviet power divided Ossetia (a formerly Ottoman territory annexed by Russia in 1774) into two entities each of which was placed under different jurisdiction. In April 1922, South Ossetia (an area of 3,900 km²) was incorporated as an oblast to Georgia which, then, belonged (together with Armenia and Azerbaijan) to the Federation of Transcaucasia. As for North Ossetia (a larger territory of 8,600 km²), it became an oblast within the Russian Federation in July 1924. In addition, the Ossetian people were obliged to

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6 Ajaria did not formally secede. However, it did not recognize the fiscal authority of the Georgian State.