OSCE’s ‘frozen conflicts’ remain volatile

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1. New conflict between Georgia and Russia looming?
Although the short August war between Georgia and Russia is still fresh in the memory, some pundits expect a resumption of hostilities some time in the course of this year. The ceasefire, reached after five days of fighting, officially still holds, but it is extremely fragile with numerous incidents and it seems only a question of time until the fighting will flare up again.

Official relations between Georgia and the Russian Federation are almost non-existent and the ‘peace talks’ in Geneva, headed by the EU, UN and OSCE, have not produced many tangible results so far. Initially the talks could not even formally start, since the Russians insisted on the acceptance of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia as independent parties, which is unacceptable for all other parties involved as they consider both regions to be part of the territory of Georgia. In February an agreement was reached on some kind of confidence-building measures, aimed at preventing incidents from spilling over into outright fighting. The mechanisms involve weekly meetings — or more frequent if necessary — to handle disputes and incidents on the ground. Also a 24-hour hotline has been agreed upon.

Although the leaders of the two break-away regions frequently accuse Georgia of conducting preparations to begin further aggression, EU monitors report that no evidence of a military build-up on the Georgian side exists. Also, a number of OSCE monitors are patrolling the Georgian side of the conflict zone, as nobody is allowed inside the territory of South-Ossetia so far. Nevertheless, the South-Ossetian authorities accuse the EU and OSCE monitors of siding with Georgia and frequently crossing the border into South-Ossetian area. In February, some OSCE monitors were shortly detained by Ossetian police and then expelled to Georgian-controlled territory after a couple of hours. Although the relations with Abkhazia are similarly volatile, most tensions seem to exist with the South-Ossetian authorities which, backed by the Russians, very often use bellicose language.

The situation inside South-Ossetia seems to be very bleak. Geographically it is clearly part of Georgia and its only link with the Russian Federation goes

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through a tunnel which in winter frequently can’t be used because of the harsh winter conditions. Economically it is in a catastrophic situation, as the traditional ‘trade’ links with Georgia have come to a complete standstill. And although Russia has promised considerable humanitarian aid, very little has apparently reached the ground thus far. Politically it is in a similar situation with a Russian-declared ‘independence’ which has not been recognized by anybody else in the international community, not even Moscow’s closest allies. A continuation of the status quo is therefore not very appealing to the Ossetians. Moscow also has no interest in a continuation of the present situation as long as the Georgian President Saakashvili is still in power. The Russians so strongly despise this young president that according to some experts they might be tempted to oust him violently.

In the meantime, preparations for closing down the OSCE Mission in Georgia are going on, although the Greek Chair-in-Office of the OSCE continues lobbying Moscow to get them to accept some kind of continued presence. It remains unlikely that the Russians can be convinced to accept a ‘compromise’.

2. Conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh

Although the conflict in and around Nagorno-Karabakh is generally considered as another ‘frozen conflict’ in the OSCE area, it might be ‘unfreezing’ as well. The Russian recognition of the independence of Georgia’s break-away regions has made Azerbaijan particularly nervous. The unexpected signing of a declaration by the Armenian and Azerbaijani Presidents during a visit to the Russian President Medvedev in autumn last year has had no significant impact on the ongoing negotiations in the context of the Minsk process. Recently the three co-chairs of the Minsk Group (the U.S., Russia and France) visited the region for renewed talks with the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Although the world tends to think that the conflict zone is pretty stable since the armistice of 1994, reality is different. There are regular shootings at, what is officially called, the Line of Contact. At the end of February, even the OSCE Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office, the Polish Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, was involved in such an incident, in spite of his written security guarantees provided by local commanders. In 2008 alone, over 30 people have been killed at this line of contact, whereas more than 50 were injured. In the first two months of 2009, six more people have been killed.

3. Negotiations on Transdniestria to be resumed?

From the initiative of the Russian leader, a remarkable (yet, politically, rather empty) declaration has been signed in areas outside the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as well. The same has taken place around the conflict in the Moldovan break-away region of Transdniestria. In March, the presidents of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, and Moldova, Vladimir Voronin, met with the self-proclaimed ‘president’ of Transdniestria, Igor Smirnov. To the surprise of many observers, the three leaders signed a Russian-drafted declaration with text that is at odds with