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OSCE Conflict Management in Georgia: The Political Context

Differentiation can be made between global, regional and local factors in the environment surrounding the conflicts in Georgia. Through their interests, but also through the formal conflict-solving mechanisms, the great powers have become directly involved. In the much-invoked regional approach, the initial assumption is that the whole area comprises a system. Thus changes in part of this space would affect other areas or even the whole region. This is certainly a correct assumption although it is unclear how strong the mutual dependencies are. Indeed, the term "regional approach" can be used as a political instrument. For actors who are not interested in solving a specific conflict, utilizing a regional strategy can be an opportunity to delay and, for a calculable period, block the solution to an individual conflict by instead pointing to a solution for the entire region. However, this concept can also mean that the responsibility for solving the conflict is shifted to the regional or the great powers. This is also the case incidentally, for the so-called Stability Pact for the Caucasus, the essential contents of which are obviously meant to be an agreement between the great powers and/or the regional powers on their respective future spheres of influence in the Caucasus region. The views on how to demarcate concrete interest lines specifically are then dependent on the political strategy in question.

The assumption here is that the individual conflicts in Georgia are dependent upon one another or can be attributed to common factors and moreover that they are used as political instruments.

In 1992, the Georgian government asked the CSCE/OSCE¹ to assist them in resolving the conflict existing at that time in South Ossetia/the Tskhinvali region. In October 1992, the OSCE Mission to Georgia was set up under circumstances similar to civil war. The conflict with Abkhazia led to an extension of the mandate, which in the end was completed in 1999 with the establishment of border monitoring along the Chechen section of the Russian/Georgian border. In addition, the Mission has taken on the task of assisting Georgia in safeguarding human rights and democratization. This means the OSCE has a strong presence, at least on paper, in one of the most important crisis regions in the world, which is characterized by an explosive mixture of ethnically motivated separatist efforts, cultural and religious diversity, conflicting strategic and economic interests between the great and regional pow-

¹ In the following the distinction between the CSCE and the OSCE will no longer be mentioned.

ers as well as having weak forms of institutionalization, statehood and democracy.

Georgia owes the international community's interest primarily to its geopolitical position. Important commercial arteries, traffic and transportation routes run through its territory. It lies in the strategic apron south of the Russian Federation border line and at the same time has a common border with Turkey, a member of NATO. The pro-West position of the present government and the relatively advanced level of the democratization process in comparison to other Caucasus states suggest that Georgia can lead the way in accepting and reinforcing Western and international values in the Caucasus region. However at the same time, Georgia shares many of the problems of the other successor states to the former Soviet Union. Its shattered infrastructure, the fact that black market activity is a high percentage of GDP and the resultant low tax revenues as well as wide-spread corruption do not bode well for the future of the country. Moreover Georgia was not spared the disintegration processes typical for the dissolution of an empire. Although South Ossetian and Abkhaz separatism was not followed by secession in other parts of Georgia it has become increasingly clear that the central government in Tbilisi has progressively lost influence in the course of the economic and energy crises and not just in the conflict areas.

In view of the fact that the attempt at a military solution to the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was unsuccessful, Georgia had hopes that the internationalization of the conflicts would strengthen its position. One of the reasons why Georgia is oriented towards the West is that its hopes have been dashed that Russia would in one way or the other help it regain Abkhazia. Moreover Georgia has had to rely on Western financial assistance. A Western orientation in foreign relations and domestic stabilization therefore have become the dominating goals in Georgian policy since 1995. This policy did in fact lead to stabilizing the situation. However, Georgia is paying double the price: Firstly, Georgia is still closely tied to the Russian economic market and it is still under the Russian sphere of influence, which occasionally leads to contradictions in its orientation towards the West. And secondly the stabilization policy has contributed to the fact that these conflicts have up to now remained unsolved and developed into so-called "frozen conflicts".

The interests of the great powers in the Caucasus are by no means diametrically opposed and the chances are rather slim that this region could turn into the front line of a new Cold War. Russia and the United States both have an equal interest in stemming the flow of drugs and weapons as well as preventing and eliminating Islamic extremism. The war in Chechnya however has brought weapons and drugs (primarily to finance the Chechen resistance) to the whole region. Moreover Georgia is particularly and directly affected by military operations because both conflict parties are endeavouring to utilize its territory to wage war: Chechen fighters are seeking to escape pursuit by Russian units and the Russian leadership is attempting to put the screws on

the Chechens. There is a lot of political pressure being put on the Georgian government to agree to joint military operations in the Georgian Pankisi gorge which has been underlined by the introduction of certain measures such as a visa requirement for bilateral traffic in December 2000. In this manner, the war in Chechnya has destabilized the entire region and a stabilization of the situation is not very likely in near future.

These are the prevailing circumstances (indeed not very favourable) under which OSCE activities in Georgia take place. Its Mission is the guest of the Georgian government and can thus not assume the role of a neutral mediator. However, the representatives of South Ossetia and Abkhazia regularly reproach the OSCE for just this reason. Neutrality is however also excluded due to the policies of the international community who - if at all - encourages and recognizes territorial changes only when they are achieved conjointly. There have been precedents in which the international community has recognized the unilateral secession of sections of a sovereign state. However, the results of this were seldom encouraging (e.g. the disintegration of Yugoslavia). Therefore, with regard to its various separatisms, Georgia can reckon with the support of the international community. This is also true of the position of the Russian Federation, which alone due to Chechen separatism feels it is necessary to favour the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty over the right to self-determination.

Against this backdrop all expectations and hopes for a speedy solution to the frozen conflicts in Georgia are exaggerated. The will to solve the conflicts politically is not very strong. However, it is most likely on the Georgian side. The conflict parties are not satisfied with the status quo but have more or less accepted it. Up to now, the most important contribution of the presence of the international community has been that they have transformed the military conflicts into institutionally anchored dialogues. However, this came about only because the conflict parties were prepared to enter into a dialogue and because a military presence made up of CIS peacekeeping troops was established in both conflict zones.

In addition to the war in Chechnya, the question of dismantling Russian military bases on Georgian territory brought some movement into the routine course of Georgian policies and policy-making. The decision to establish a border monitoring mission along the Chechen section of the Georgian-Russian border, a Georgian desire, was a welcome opportunity for the OSCE Mission to Georgia to demonstrate its competence in conflict prevention. This mission mandate includes the observation of cross-border traffic, however the mission does not have the right to implement direct control. Additionally, there is no authorization to make observations or to report on fighting taking place on the territory of the Russian Federation. As a result of the deployment of OSCE border monitors, cross-border traffic has decreased to a minimum (in any case, since the only road connection leading through Shatili was closed in the winter of 1999, the only way to cross the border is on a

very steep mule track). For these and other reasons, official reports are always polished over diplomatically and have remained unimpressive. The Georgian side has been citing these reports as proof from the international community that the Russian reproaches that Georgia was maintaining or allowing training camps for Chechen fighters on Georgian territory had no basis. Russia, on the other hand, has been pressing for a comprehensive monitoring mission along the entire border. It is too early to make a final evaluation of the success of this mission. However, it has shown that the co-operation between rival states within the framework of the OSCE is feasible even if the task is highly sensitive (the monitoring mission is headed by a Danish general and there are two deputies, one from the US and one from Russia). Moreover, the co-operation at the operational level between Russian and Georgian border troops is excellent and has not been affected by the political static accompanying it.

The OSCE role with respect to the disbanding of the Russian military bases has not yet been defined. At the OSCE Summit in November 1999 in Istanbul, the Russian Federation agreed to gradually close their bases on Georgian territory.² In addition, Russia made a commitment to withdraw so-called TLE (Treaty Limited Equipment) from Georgia within the framework of the CFE Treaty. In the meantime, the latter has taken place with the OSCE assuming verification tasks to a certain extent as well. There are still differences of opinion between Russia and Georgia on disbanding the Russian bases in Gudauta, Batumi and Akhalkalaki. The Georgian government wants a withdrawal within the shortest possible time frame whereas the Russian side has suggested a time frame of up to 15 years. Moreover there are differences as to how the base in Gudauta (in Abkhazia) will be used in future. The Russian side has suggested transforming it into a recreation centre for CIS peacekeeping troops while the Georgians are pushing towards the maximal demand for a total surrender of the property to the Georgian army.

This is also in keeping with the perception of the Georgian government that the conflicts "froze" because of the presence of the (predominantly Russian) CIS peacekeeping troops. Thus, also in the future the OSCE will be under

2 The original of this text is as follows: "(2) No later than 31 December 2000 the Russian Side will withdraw (dispose of) the TLE located at the Russian military bases at Vaziani and Gudauta and at the repair facilities in Tbilisi. The Russian military bases at Gudauta and Vaziani will be disbanded and withdrawn by 1 July 2001. The issue of the utilization, including the joint utilization, of the military facilities and infrastructure of the disbanded Russian military bases remaining at those locations will be resolved within the same time-frame. (3) The Georgian Side undertakes to grant to the Russian Side the right to basic temporary deployment of its TLE at facilities of the Russian military bases at Batumi and Akhalkalaki. (4) The Georgian Side will facilitate the creation of the conditions necessary for reducing and withdrawing the Russian forces. In this connection, the two Sides note the readiness of OSCE participating States to provide financial support for this process. (5) During the year 2000 the two Sides will 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."

double the pressure: The Georgian side will try to force proposals that are directed towards the withdrawal of CIS peacekeeping forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and/or replacing them (this will occur under the concept of "internationalization") with a Georgia-friendly army (e.g. that of the Ukraine or Western states). For the Russian Federation these proposals are currently not acceptable and *ultra vires*. It views Georgia, not only but primarily, as being indispensable strategic territory in connection with the Chechen conflict. And it would like to prevent NATO (in whatever form) from advancing into the area.³

The negotiations on military and other guarantees for a future peace agreement between Tskhinvali and Tbilisi, which were the result of the Baden Meeting,⁴ are, to put it mildly, premature - apart from the fact that the main points of the interim document are still open. The same is true *mutatis mutandis* for the Abkhazia conflict. Here the OSCE does not have a mandate for political negotiations, but the practical difficulties are the same as those in South Ossetia. As a lead agency, the UNOMIG must essentially be content to carry out mediatory activities that guarantee a prolongation of the mandate in the Security Council.

The basic lines of future conflicts are already beginning to emerge. Because of the weakness of state structures, there is a danger a further disintegration will occur. This is not as true for Ajaria as it is for Javakhetia, which is inhabited by Armenians. If the Russian base in Akhalkalaki is closed, economic problems in this region will, despite international aid, become more severe. In addition to this there is still the politically highly controversial issue of the return of the Meskhetians to this area to which Georgia committed itself on the occasion of its admittance to the Council of Europe (1999). The only solution here would be to implement infrastructure projects, which should be organized to include all ethnic groups to lessen the resistance of the local authorities to repatriation. Incidentally, the issue of the return of the Meskhetians to Georgia is a perfect example of a conflict that calls for a regional approach. This conflict is virulent because their legal status and the practical circumstances under which Meskhetians live in their current localities (especially in southern Russia and Azerbaijan) are instable, threatened and/or difficult. Desired and possible controlled repatriation thus does not only demand advanced concessions from Georgia, but also requires guarantees from all guest states as well as international co-ordination. This would be a genuine task for the OSCE, who due to the difficulties in solving the conflicts in Georgia up to now has only been able to book a few concrete successes in this area of its mandate.

3 The presence of US military advisers will be accepted as a mixed blessing as long as it underpins the Russian claim that international and Chechen terrorists are hiding in the Pankisi gorge that borders Chechnya to the south.

4 A meeting of experts from Georgia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, decided upon at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in November 1999, took place at the beginning of July 2000 in Baden near Vienna.