

Elections continue causing turmoil in the OSCE region

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1. Elections continue causing turmoil

Although free and fair elections are often seen as the best solution for political problems in countries, recent developments in the OSCE region demonstrate that this is definitely (no longer?) the case. If the losing party is simply not willing to accept the outcome of elections, even when international observers are convinced that they have been free and fair, it may cause serious political problems.

An excellent example of this phenomenon is the recent developments in Moldova. On the 5th of April, the (nominally) communist party won the parliamentary elections for the third consecutive time in an election process which was assessed positively by Western observers and international organizations. The communist party won 60 of the 101 parliamentary seats, whereas the remaining 41 went to three 'liberal' parties. However, the opposition, far from accepting the outcome of the elections, called for public protests which quickly got out of hand. Violent mobs of mainly young people stormed and ransacked the presidency and parliament buildings, going so far as to set them on fire. Police watched without intervening, apparently unable to believe that such things could happen in previously peaceful Moldova. Although the opposition leaders later tried to distance themselves from this violence, it was obvious that they triggered the mayhem in Chisinau and they continue to call for new elections.

Despite the Moldovan opposition being unable to submit concrete proof of election fraud and despite a recount of all votes proving the correctness of the original outcome, they continued to protest, thereby mocking the international election observers, including an upbeat OSCE delegation of observers that had publicly declared that 'these elections were very good'. The situation became worse when, shortly after the attack on the parliament and presidency buildings, the police apparently received orders to intervene and did so brutally. When the incendiary speeches by both the government and opposition sides continued, all the ingredients were there for further turmoil. That happened in parliament, which was supposed to elect a new president. In order to elect a president, 61 votes are necessary. Since the communist party only holds 60 seats, the outcome was clear: several rounds of voting didn't produce a candidate with the result that new elections will have to be held shortly after summer.

In this way Moldova, already in the middle of a quickly deteriorating economic crisis, has been thrown into a political crisis as it had not seen since its independence in 1991. The lack of political maturity of losing parties in the elections managed to plunge the country into further chaos. The Moldovan example shows that, even in a democracy, it requires at least two to tango.

A comparable situation has developed in Georgia where, in early April, a large group of relatively small opposition parties went to the streets in order to demand the resignation of President Mikhail Shaakashvili. Although Western diplomats called on the opposition to enter into dialogue with the Georgian authorities, they stuck to their demand of Shaakashvili's unconditional departure. The authorities, having learned from the bad consequences of a police crackdown on an earlier demonstration in the centre of Tbilisi, this time showed total constraint and didn't intervene in any way in the demonstrations, even though they became more intrusive over time. This was a result of the fact that the lack of success of the demonstrations led to a dwindling numbers of demonstrations, so that the leaders saw themselves forced to look for new and more aggressive ways to keep the public attention. In this case as well, it is obvious that the opposition continues to reject the outcome of the presidential election which, from the very beginning, they have refused to accept, despite international observers concluding that the vote had been largely free and fair.

These developments should lead to a thorough discussion within the OSCE whether the present system of election observations should not be reviewed. If the opposition in various OSCE countries simply refuses to accept the outcome of elections, which have been labeled as 'free and fair' by the OSCE, the organization seems to have a problem.

2. Growing tensions in the Caucasus

The consequences of the brief war between Georgia and Russia last August and the subsequent Russian recognition of the 'independence' of Abkhazia and South- Ossetia continue to reverberate throughout the OSCE region. The tensions in the region remain high and it's obvious that the Russians continue to have a keen interest in a regime-change in the Georgian capital. Since the Georgian president Shaakashvili is considered to be a 'political corpse' — one with whom the Russians don't even want to talk — it's clear that Moscow will take any chance to bring about a change in Georgia. The ongoing demonstrations by the political opposition in Tbilisi are, therefore, a welcome development for the Russians and there are plenty of rumours that they are actively and passively supporting it.

Although the two Georgian break-away regions enjoy their so-called 'independence' (which has not been recognized by a single other state in the world except for Nicaragua), it is clear that, de facto, they are being integrated into the corpse of the Russian Federation. At the same time the situation on the ground remains bleak. Although the Russians had promised massive amounts of help to, in particular, South-Ossetia, in practice very little has arrived, leading to further political tensions in the 'newly-independent state' during the harsh winter months. Only in March did the Ossetian leadership apparently manage to convince their Russian 'brothers' that the promised assistance had to be delivered as soon as possible. However, the Russians only paid out some money for 'social-economic development and maintaining balanced budgets' which meant that the Ossetian regime got the money to pay for salaries, pensions etc. However, the pledged funds for the reconstruction of the devastated areas didn't arrive, in all likelihood due to continuing disagreement about the control of the flow of funds. The Russians are clearly weary of the total corruption in the Ossetian ranks. Reconstruction could only start, at the earliest, in summer, presuming that an agreement will be reached about the funding mechanisms. In the meantime, the area seems to be getting more and more depopulated.

International monitoring of the developments in both break-away regions has become very difficult. The Russians thus far, have prevented OSCE monitors from returning to South-Ossetia and Abkhazia, as they put the unacceptable condition of 'recognition of the independence' of both regions. This resulted in the closing down of the OSCE Missions in Georgia. In the middle of June, the Russian Federation also vetoed the continuation of the mandate of the small group of UN monitors (UNOMIG) in Abkhazia in the UN Security Council. Although the UN Secretary-General had made major efforts to find acceptable language for the Russian Federation, in the end, the draft text was unacceptable for Moscow, as it did not properly take into account 'the new realities' on the ground. The result is that the UN had to pack their belongings immediately and leave the enclave. Only in Georgia itself, a relatively small group of EU monitors is still active, but they don't have any access to the two regions where allegedly a serious ethnic cleansing has taken place.

In the middle of April the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities expressed his deep concern about the Abkhaz efforts to pressure the ethnic- Georgian population in the Gali region in Abkhazia. He issued a statement which included the following:

'I am deeply concerned about recent developments in the Gali District of Abkhazia, which have led to a deteriorating security situation in the region. In line with my conflict prevention mandate, I urge the de facto authorities to put an end to the pressure being exercised on the Georgian population in the Gali District through the limitation of their education rights, compulsory 'passportization', forced conscription into the Abkhaz military forces and restrictions on their freedom of movement.'

'I also regret the decision of de facto leadership to close the administrative border of Abkhazia, which makes it increasingly difficult for the population to maintain family contacts, access necessary health care or sell their products on the other side of the de facto border. I am concerned that such coercive practices, which violate international law, may further destabilize the already fragile inter-ethnic situation in the region and force many Georgians to leave.'

'I reiterate that international norms and standards require that any authority exercising jurisdiction over population and territory, even if not recognized by the international community, must respect the human rights of everyone, including those of persons belonging to ethnic communities. I urge the de facto authorities to desist from all intimidation and the imposition of Abkhazian 'citizenship' on and forced conscription of Georgians living in the Gali District. I also urge the de facto authorities to respect the education rights of Georgians residing there and to allow Georgian students in the region to study in the Georgian language.'

'While I understand and welcome the desire of the de facto Abkhaz authorities to strengthen the Abkhaz identity and language, I would like to stress that this should be done in a way that does not negatively affect the rights of persons belonging to other ethnic communities in the region to maintain and develop their own language and culture.'

It is highly unlikely that this protest has had any impact on the ground though.

At the end of April and into May, tensions were rising ever further, when joint military exercises with NATO took place in Georgia. In spite of very strong Russian protests against this 'provocation' the exercises took place as planned, while the Russians had their own military exercises on their side of the border. Although there were fears that this might lead to clashes, at the end of the day, it remained only clashes of words.

3. Continued Russian lobby for a 'new' collective security treaty

During his April visit to Finland, the Russian President Dimitri Medvedev, used the opportunity to strongly lobby for the Russian wish to come to a new collective security treaty in Europe, which he labeled as a 'Helsinki-Plus'. Although this idea is not new — the Russian president introduced the idea already a year ago at a security conference in Munich, Germany - the Western response so far has been to ignore the idea. Although it is clear that the Russians are not satisfied with the way the OSCE is functioning, a 'replacement' with a new system is no guarantee at all that this would lead to more stability in the Eurasian security environment. It is, therefore, very unlikely that the Russian grand ambitions will lead to anything. Nevertheless, it can't be denied that, in particular due to the Russian dissatisfaction, the consensus-based OSCE is becoming increasingly less relevant. The closing of the OSCE Mission in Georgia is just the most recent example of this development.

4. Some internal events in the OSCE

The lesser relevance of the OSCE might also be detected in the behaviour of the present Greek Chairmanship of the OSCE. Chairmen usually issue numerous political statements about all kinds of worrisome developments in the OSCE area. However, the Greek chairmanship apparently decided to enlarge the scope and issued on the 10th of June a statement expressing concern about a bomb attack in..... Pakistan. Of course, it can't be denied that the political developments in Pakistan are extremely troublesome, but it's hard to see why the OSCE Chairmanship needs to issue a rather irrelevant statement about a non-OSCE country. The question can be raised why the chairmanship has never issued a statement about the worrisome political developments in Thailand (political turmoil in the capital, an ongoing and increasingly bloody insurgency in the Muslim south of the country), while Thailand is even a Partner for Cooperation of the OSCE. Or why not about the regular deadly bomb blasts in Iraq? Such behaviour by the OSCE Chairmanship is hard to understand and doesn't indicate the strength of the organization.

The Greeks also caused further surprises. For the first time in the OSCE history, they took the initiative to organize an informal Ministerial at the island of Corfu in order to discuss the Russian proposal to come to a European security treaty. The fact that many ministers demonstrated their willingness to show up is an indication that this meeting was really necessary. The more so since it has been a real challenge earlier this decade to lure enough ministers of foreign affairs to come to the Ministerials.

This year the budget for the OSCE was approved in the very beginning of April. Although it was three months late, it was still earlier than in previous years, when the Russian Federation regularly caused serious delays by withholding its consent. The 2009 budget amounts to almost 159 million euro, around 6 million less than last year's budget.

The present Secretary-General of the OSCE, Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, wrote OSCE history in April this year, when he had a private audience with Pope Benedict XVI in the Vatican in Rome. Such an encounter had never happened before in the OSCE history. Both gentlemen discussed 'the state of security co- operation in the OSCE region, and promoting tolerance and non-discrimination', as stated in the official communiqué. The Holy See is an active participating State of the OSCE since its inception.



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