

OSCE'S YEAR-END CONFERENCE: WHEN FAILURE HELPS CLARITY

by Vladimir Socor

Even in its failure, the OSCE year-end conference on December 4-5 in Brussels managed to highlight the fact that Russia's conflict undertakings in Georgia and Moldova constitute the most salient problem of European security at present. This fact had been implicitly understood for some time, but the Brussels ministerial conference turned that understanding into an explicit one. The addresses by the Georgian and Moldovan ministers of foreign affairs, Gela Bezhuashvili and Andrei Stratan, defined the problem in those terms -- convincingly for the great majority of participant countries, and isolating Russia on this issue. The U.S. addresses, delivered by Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns and Ambassador Julie Finley, framed the issue in the same way. As Burns put it,

“Two members of our Organization, in particular, are under tremendous pressure. In Moldova and Georgia, protracted conflicts and external threats impede the full development of states, creating unsecured borders, undermining their sovereignty,” Burns declared. “As long as these countries remain torn from within, and open support for separatist regimes continues from outside...we must give Georgia and Moldova our full support. We call for resumption of Russian military withdrawal and complete fulfillment of Russia's remaining Istanbul Commitments regarding Moldova and Georgia. [We call] to refrain from fomenting instability in neighboring states and reject the idea that a state may maintain a military presence in another state against the will of that state. [We call] to hold accountable any state that infringes on these principles.”

Bezhuashvili summed up the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: “Instead of demilitarization, foreign-backed heavy rearmament; instead of improved security and human rights, the power of organized crime and contraband are growing. The existing formats for peacekeeping and negotiations are deeply biased, contributing to creeping annexation of territories of Georgia.” In this situation, Bezhuashvili observed, the oft-used term “status quo” is a misnomer, as the situation is in fact steadily deteriorating. Consequently, “Russia has lost credibility as an honest broker -- it does not form a bridge, but a wall preventing a direct dialogue” by Tbilisi with the Abkhaz and South Ossetians.

Georgia called again at this conference for impartial international missions, mainly consisting of police, to replace the existing “peacekeeping” operations and for bilateral dialogues with the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, under United Nations and OSCE aegis, respectively, to discuss broad autonomy for those two areas in Georgia. The OSCE's credibility, Bezhuashvili warned, will be severely diminished if decisions adopted by consensus are not implemented and participant states fail to comply with the principles enshrined in the organization's documents.

Similarly, Moldova's Stratan called for the earliest transformation of the (Russian) “peacekeeping” force, replacing it new multinational mission of observers, both military and civilian, under an international mandate. Only such a transformation would allow

Moldova to ratify the adapted CFE treaty, the Moldovan address reaffirmed, in tune with Georgia's position. Stratan called for a full, early, and unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces in accordance with the 1999 Istanbul Commitments.

At this conference, Moldova invoked its neutrality (under the country's 1993 constitution) in unusually strong terms as an argument for the removal of Russian forces. "As a neutral country," Stratan insisted, Moldova "wants in the nearest future to be free of any form of foreign military or quasi-military presence. Moldova's people expect Russia to comply with Moldova's constitutional choice -- the status of neutrality."

An all-but-isolated Russia blocked the OSCE's draft regional declarations on the conflicts in Transnistria and South Ossetia (the Abkhazia problem is supposedly a UN responsibility). The Moscow-vetoed documents were calling for demilitarization of both areas, internationalization of peacekeeping, curbing trans-border and other forms of organized crime, economic reconstruction, and internationally assisted negotiations to establish the political status of South Ossetia and Transnistria within Georgia and Moldova, respectively.

The OSCE's outgoing chairman-in-office, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel de Gucht, issued the Chair's Perception Statement -- the usual way for the annual chairmanship to conclude a year-end conference when consensus is lacking. As Russia had withheld its consent on the documents, de Gucht expressed his perception of the state of implementation of Russia's Istanbul Commitments. De Gucht's was, in fact, a calculated misperception:

"Taking note of the fact that, as regards Moldova, no progress could be registered in 2006, most ministers call on the Russian Federation and parties concerned to allow the process of withdrawal of ammunition and related military personnel to resume expeditiously. Ministers reaffirm their shared determination to promote the entry into force of the adapted CFE Treaty."

This wording in the Perception Statement, identical to that in de Gucht's draft for a conference declaration, attempts to whittle down Russia's outstanding Istanbul Commitments almost to the point of erasing them (see EDM, November 27). The Perception Statement also seems to miss the fact that an overwhelming majority of the heads of delegations in their speeches actually called for the withdrawal of Russian forces. NATO and the European Union took this position collectively as well as in the member countries' national statements. Not a single national statement was found that would have confined the goal to a withdrawal of ammunition and related personnel.

(Documents of the OSCE's year-end conference, December 5, 2006)

--Vladimir Socor

OSCE: END OF YEAR BRINGS END OF ROAD AS SECURITY ACTOR

by Vladimir Socor

The OSCE's year-end conference, which opened on December 4 in Brussels, foundered again as it has every year since 2001 on the main unresolved European security problem: Russian forces in Georgia and Moldova and the related status of the treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE).

While these issues have become perennial, this year-end meeting's failure differs from the preceding ones in three respects: First, it loomed during the preparatory stage and was consummated already on the first day of the conference (not in the final day's frantic final hours as had been the case in past years). Second, the organization's Belgian Chairmanship distanced itself from the NATO and EU positions on those issues to accommodate Russia, only to fall between the Euro-Atlantic and the Russian stools. And third, some delegations spoke with unusual frankness about Russia's unlawful conduct and the OSCE's incapacity as a European security actor.

Ahead of the conference, the Belgian Chng Russia's non-fulfillment of the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Commitments to withdraw its forces from Moldova and Georgia. The document's terms came close to breaking the linkage between Russian troop withdrawal and Western ratification of the 1999-adapted CFE treaty -- a linkage that constitutes NATO and EU policy (see EDM, November 27). At the same time, Russia ruled out the traditional year-end "regional declarations" such as those on post-Soviet conflicts, unless the documents would fully satisfy Moscow.

Opening the conference as Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel de Gucht tried to preempt criticism of the OSCE on those counts. It is "pointless and deeply harmful" to criticize the OSCE for failing to resolve conflicts, he maintained, because the organization cannot substitute for the parties themselves in settling those 15-year-old conflicts. De Gucht appealed to those [unnamed] parties to resume the interrupted negotiations with the argument, "Their future as well as the future of our organization is at stake." His comments reflected the organization's focus on negotiating indefinitely as a goal in itself and its reluctance to hold Russia responsible for the deadlock in three conflicts.

By contrast, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Vondra observed, "Public opinion in many countries has long associated the OSCE with fruitless attempts at conflict resolution in Moldova and Georgia. Certain worrisome developments have further reduced confidence in the existing negotiation and peacekeeping formats and good faith of some of the parties involved in them."

In a similar vein, Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Paet admonished, "The OSCE can not turn a blind eye to the actions undertaken by Russia against neighboring Georgia for the mere reason that the latter has opted for a Euro-Atlantic future. Unilateral sanctions and blockades are anachronistic tools. We should build confidence and support reforms in a Georgia whole and free. The OSCE's credibility is also at stake in Moldova.

The presence of foreign troops, without the consent of the host country, is a major source of instability. We need to respond to Moldovan calls for a truly international peacekeeping operation, especially as the existing setup only serves to stall a resolution of the conflict. Failure to resolve the 'frozen conflicts' is seriously undermining the OSCE's credibility."

Slovak Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kubis, a former Secretary-General of the OSCE, suggested that the organization should defer to the EU as a security actor: "Regrettably, the overall atmosphere and developments in conflict areas generally are not encouraging. We must again question the effectiveness of the existing OSCE mechanisms and approaches. Perhaps we should further strengthen the role and engagements of the EU."

On the European Union's collective behalf, the Finnish Presidency cautioned Russia, "The complete fulfillment of the 1999 Istanbul Commitments on Georgia and Moldova, remains essential. We note with regret the continuing lack of progress on the withdrawal of Russian forces from Moldova and call upon Russia to resume and complete its withdrawal." The EU called for a comprehensive settlement involving political, economic, and security aspects, "including the transformation of the peacekeeping operation." The weak point in the EU position, however, is its indecision about the proper sequence: Some Moscow-friendly chancelleries want political settlement first and transformation of the Russian "peacekeeping" only afterward, although the deployment of international and largely civilian peacekeepers is clearly a prerequisite to a viable settlement

In tune with the EU, non-member Norway also told the conference that Moldova and Georgia have the right to develop without foreign troops on their territories and the right to choose Europe without interference from outside.

As had been the case at some previous year-end conferences Russia overplayed its hand and missed its chance to capitalize on the chairmanship's draft final declaration. That document unilaterally redefined Russia's Istanbul Commitments, particularly on Moldova, in a minimalist way almost to the point of erasing them: It omitted withdrawal of troops, called for a mere start to withdrawal of ammunition, indirectly allowed even that to depend on Tiraspol's "permission," and omitted as well the vexing issue of the Russian unaccounted-for treaty-limited equipment. With "fulfillment" of the Istanbul Commitments thus whittled down beyond recognition, the draft held out to Russia the prospect of ratification of the adapted CFE Treaty.

However, on the eve of the conference, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that it would not tolerate in the final documents any reference to the "so-called" Istanbul Commitments or any linkage between that and the adapted CFE treaty's ratification. "We will not accept any such text," chief spokesman Mikhail Kamynin warned (Interfax, December 1, 4). Thus, Moscow ended up frustrating the Chairmanship's hopes to end up with a final ministerial declaration at this conference.

--Vladimir Socor