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Chechnya – the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) experience, 1995–2003

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Abstract

Comprising 55 participating states, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has, since its establishment in 1995, been given numerous assignments concerned with early warning, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. These tasks have been carried out by a diverse group of field operations, including the (now defunct) Assistance Group to Chechnya. Despatched to Grozny in 1995 during the separatist war, the Assistance Group came to play a unique role insofar as its mandate explicitly also included mediation between the conflicting parties, namely the Russian federal government and the Chechen separatist regime. Exploiting a brief window of opportunity, the Assistance Group was a spectacular success, facilitating the 1996 cease-fire, organising and monitoring the subsequent democratic elections, and also paving the way for the May 1997 Russian–Chechen peace treaty. By that time, however, the Russian government had given notice that the Assistance Group's mediation efforts were no longer wanted. Subsequent developments – including a general breakdown in the security environment, the Russian repudiation of their previous recognition of the Chechen authorities and of their own commitment to the peace process, and finally the renewed military hostilities from 1999 – led to a drastic scaling-down of the scope and relevance of the Assistance Group's activities. After unsuccessful attempts to re-establish the Assistance Group as a field operation, its mandate was terminated in 2003. Lessons learnt from the Assistance Group experience include the realisation that the consensus principle remains the main obstacle preventing the OSCE from playing a decisively meaningful role in conflicts involving one of the organisation's own more powerful member states. Russia's insistence that Chechnya is a purely domestic matter precludes any action – diplomatic or otherwise – on the part of the OSCE in resolving the prevailing conflict situation. Nevertheless, the OSCE also remains the organisation best equipped to keep a watchful eye on developments such as we have seen in Chechnya, thereby also contributing to keeping alive the hope that the international community will not tolerate indefinitely the plight of the people who have fallen victim to this semi-forgotten conflict. Besides, even when the road to peace, stability and a

comprehensive political settlement seems closed, there will always be a need for a credible provider of basic humanitarian assistance. Although not a core function of the OSCE, this is nevertheless an area where the organisation has the ability to make a difference.

Keywords: Assistance Group, Chechnya, conflict mediation, humanitarian assistance, international community, OSCE

1 INTRODUCTION: THE OSCE FIELD OPERATIONS

Gradually evolving from the embryonic *détente* initiatives of the 1970s, and having braved the clashing rocks of the still lingering Cold War of the 1980s, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) finally emerged as a full-fledged international organisation with the renaming (in 1995) of what had formerly been known as the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). On its website, the OSCE now boasts of being ‘the world’s largest regional security organization whose 55 participating States span the geographical area from Vancouver to Vladivostok’.¹ The objectives of the OSCE are, broadly speaking, concerned with early warning, conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. Its listing of activities also includes such tasks as anti-trafficking, arms control, border management, combating terrorism and conflict, and democratisation.

The OSCE’s main tools in carrying out these tasks are its field operations. Acting under directions from the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, and under the general auspices of the organisation’s chairman-in-council, the field operations comprise a number of rather diverse groups, each one with a specific mandate according to the problem(s) to be resolved in its respective operational area.

In September 2009, the OSCE maintained 19 field operations in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Nine formerly active OSCE field operations have subsequently been closed down. One of these – the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya, in which the author of this article served as head of mission from January 1999 to January 2000 – was in existence from 1995 to 2003. The purpose of the present article is to give an account, including a modest attempt at an analysis, of the endeavour and the modalities which the OSCE involvement in the Chechen issue entailed, and the obstacles encountered.

2 A SMALL VICTORIOUS WAR

In 1904, the then Russian Interior Minister Vyacheslav Plehve called for ‘a small victorious war to avert the revolution’ – a piece of advice that led to the calamities

of the Russo-Japanese war and the subsequent uprisings in 1905. Ninety years later, in November 1994, the same phrase was repeated by Oleg Lobov, Secretary of the Kremlin Security Council, suggesting that a small victorious war in Chechnya would ensure Boris Yeltsin's re-election as president.² On 11 December 1994, Russia began a military campaign in order to 'restore constitutional order' in the Chechen Republic, and although Yeltsin eventually did win his re-election, the war was an unmitigated disaster.

For any war – large or small – to be truly 'victorious', the victor must also win the hearts and minds of the vanquished people, or, if that is too tall an order, at least win some modicum of legitimacy. These things are usually easier said than done. For three centuries, the Russian (or Soviet) Empire has tried to conquer Chechnya and the Chechens, so far with mixed or limited success. Repeated large-scale attempts by the imperial power at annihilation of their nationhood (one thinks of General Yermolov's efforts in 1818 and those made for decades subsequently, and Stalin's wholesale deportation in 1944) have left an indelible imprint on the collective memory of the Chechen people. And now, again, in less than a decade, the region has seen two wars which have brought death, misery and immense destruction. In the successive Chechen wars and the continuing, low-intensity but sustained guerrilla-type conflict, there are no victors. Peace, stability and normalcy seem as elusive as ever.

3 THE CHECHEN CONFLICT

The mighty Russian Empire against tiny Chechnya is obviously an uneven match. It is an asymmetrical conflict – not only in terms of relative size, strength and resources, but also in terms of how it is perceived by the parties.³

From the Chechen point of view, the conflict was and remains a struggle against the colonial oppressor, a battle for national self-determination, and ultimately an attempt to defend the Chechen people against the threat of genocide. By implication, the conflict is also seen as an *international* matter, which should be dealt with as such.

From the point of view of the imperial power, the issue – predictably – was defined in rather different terms. Russia has always insisted that Chechnya is an *internal* Russian matter and that the conflict should, consequently, be dealt with as a domestic problem without any outside interference. Thus, during the 1994–1996 war, the official Russian objective (which commanded only lukewarm enthusiasm) was declared to be the restoration of constitutional order. When military operations were resumed in 1999, this had, however, been redefined as the apparently more inspiring 'defence of Russia's territorial integrity and combating terrorism'.

With this changed approach – which coincided with Vladimir Putin’s rise to power – the Russian government succeeded in winning over its own domestic public opinion in favour of its hardline policy. Also, the change in the international mood since ‘the first Chechen war’ (the 1994–1996 conflict), was striking. The predominantly sympathetic attitude toward the ‘freedom fighters’ had, by the summer of 1999, largely evaporated and been replaced by disgust and suspicion directed at the ‘terrorists’. The reasons were, broadly, twofold: gross Chechen mismanagement of their own affairs, including the ugly spectre of hostage-taking and brutal murders; and the largely successful Russian policy of managing information and news (including skilful diplomacy), thereby manipulating public opinion both at home and abroad.

If the so-called international community still harboured any misgivings concerning Russia’s handling of Chechnya, such sentiments were conveniently silenced by the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Thus, in October 2001, the *International Herald Tribune* could describe the new prevailing mood as follows:⁴

President Putin has made remarkable progress in his campaign to conflate his brutal military campaign in Chechnya with the new U.S.-led war against terrorism. Last week President George W. Bush publicly agreed with Mr. Putin that terrorists with ties to Osama bin Laden are fighting Russian forces in the predominantly Muslim republic, and said they should be ‘brought to justice’. Since then the Bush administration has begun taking concrete action in support of Moscow.

4 THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE OSCE: THE ASSISTANCE GROUP AND ITS TASKS

In the context of a situation like the one which unfolded in Chechnya in the mid-1990s, characterised *inter alia* by the apparent inability of the conflicting parties to sort out their differences on their own, one may be justified in asking whether and in what way(s) assistance from the outside could be of benefit.

Enter the elusive concept of ‘the international community’. In the broadest sense, the international community may be understood to encompass the totality of concerned public opinion as represented by national governments, inter-governmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational or transnational commercial companies, mass media, and even influential individuals ostensibly acting on behalf of a general public which is believed to support a given cause. Clearly, we are not speaking of a coherent entity which could be readily operationalised. Narrowing the scope would, however, leave the main focus on IGOs as the most prominent bodies to act on behalf of the international community.⁵

The one IGO to have a substantive track record of direct involvement in the matter of promoting peace and stability in Chechnya is the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE. What follows is an attempt to give a presentation of the scope and character of its involvement (which lasted from 1995 to 2003), as well as an account of the issues and obstacles that had to be dealt with, and of the lessons that can be derived from this exercise.

Against the background of the hostilities which started in December 1994, the decision to create an OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya was made at the 16th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on 11 April 1995. The Council also gave the Assistance Group a mandate to carry out the following tasks (to be performed in conjunction with the Russian federal and local authorities, and in conformity with the legislation of the Russian Federation):⁶

- promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and establish facts concerning their violation; help foster the development of democratic institutions and processes, including the restoration of the local organs of authority;
- assist in the preparation of possible new constitutional agreements and in the holding and monitoring of elections;
- facilitate the delivery into the region by international and non-governmental organisations humanitarian aid for victims of the crisis, wherever they may be located;
- provide assistance to the authorities of the Russian Federation and to international organisations to ensure the speediest possible return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes in the crisis region;
- promote the peaceful resolution of the crisis and the stabilisation of the situation in the Chechen Republic in conformity with the principle of the territorial integrity of the Russian Federation and in accordance with OSCE principles;
- pursue dialogue and negotiations, as appropriate, through participation in 'round tables', with a view to establishing a cease-fire and eliminating sources of tension; and
- support the creation of mechanisms guaranteeing the rule of law, public safety and law and order.

The Assistance Group began working in Grozny on 26 April 1995. Despite the importance and urgency of several of the other tasks included in the Assistance Group's impossibly broad, but conveniently flexible mandate, the most prominent of its activities during the following year and a half were – given the immediacy of the armed conflict – its mediation efforts. Thus, a comprehensive cease-fire agreement was concluded on 31 July 1995 under the auspices of the Assistance

Group. Although not observed, the agreement remained a precedent for further negotiations, with the Assistance Group playing an active role as mediator. Tireless shuttle diplomacy by the then head of the Group, Ambassador Tim Guldemann, paved the way for talks that led to a cease-fire agreement signed on 27 May 1996 (also soon broken), and was instrumental in reinstating the negotiation process that led to the Khasavyurt Agreement of 31 August 1996, which brought an end to the armed conflict. Besides establishing a cease-fire, the Khasavyurt Agreement contained a provision for pulling out all troops, and stipulated that agreement on the principles of mutual relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic was to be worked out by 31 December 2001. Also under the terms of the agreement, presidential and parliamentary elections took place on 27 January 1997 – under the auspices of (and in fact organised by) the OSCE Assistance Group.⁷ The elections, which were monitored by some 200 international observers, were declared free and fair by the OSCE and also recognised by the Russian Federation as legitimate.

4.1 ... carried out in full

Why would Russia, while stubbornly maintaining that the Chechen conflict was a purely internal affair, allow any measure of intervention by such a conspicuous agent of the ‘international community’ as the OSCE? With the benefit of hindsight, a plausible proposition would be that in 1995 a ‘window of opportunity’ was created by a combination of several factors, such as

- 1) a discernible lack of direction and coherence on the part of the responsible federal leaders in their political-military strategy involving Chechnya, who, acting under the sometimes erratic and capricious guidance of Mr Yeltsin, found themselves in a quagmire of their own making. Thus the Kremlin decision-makers might have been more disposed to accept a form of outside involvement that would also relieve them of some of the burden of responsibility;
- 2) Russia’s long-standing inclination to seek a more active role for the OSCE, in line with its general policy of promoting the idea of the OSCE’s eventually replacing NATO as the paramount all-European security organisation. This principled position was no doubt conducive to Russia’s willingness to allow the OSCE to assist in sorting out the crisis, Chechnya offering, as it were, a test case of the credibility of Russia’s professed enthusiasm for expanding the OSCE’s role.

The ‘window of opportunity’ was, however, soon to be closed. By March 1997, the accomplishments of the Assistance Group were substantial, and very evident. At this stage, with the armed conflict having been brought to an end and elections having been held, the general attitude of the parties involved (the Russian federal

as well as the Chechen regional authorities) seemed to have been that the major – and most pressing – tasks of the Assistance Group, as envisaged in its mandate, had been carried out successfully and definitively. This view was explicitly set forth in a statement by the Russian Federation to the OSCE Permanent Council on 13 March 1997, in which it was stated:⁸

Taking into account the fundamentally new situation that has arisen with regard to the settlement in the Chechen Republic (Russian Federation), the Russian side wishes once again to draw attention to the fact that the part of the OSCE Assistance Group's mandate which is related to mediation efforts in the context of settling the armed conflict and smoothing the way to negotiations has been carried out in full. The dialogue that has begun between the federal authorities and the new leadership in Chechnya as a subject of the Russian Federation is, as is natural, being conducted directly and excludes any mediation efforts whatsoever by the OSCE representatives. We presume that the work of the Assistance Group has now been refocused on other aspects of its mandate, namely those that relate to essential areas in OSCE activities: monitoring of the human rights situation; assistance in establishing democratic institutions and in ensuring the return of refugees and displaced persons; and co-ordination of efforts in providing humanitarian aid.

The Russian side reiterates its willingness to engage in constructive co-operation with the Assistance Group on these issues.

One might well legitimately ask whether Moscow in fact had the authority to unilaterally alter the mandate of the Assistance Group and thus restrict the scope of its activities. In the strictly formal sense, the answer is no. But it follows from the consensus principle that the very existence of the Assistance Group and its deployment to the region were subject to Russian approval. It was well understood that if the Assistance Group's activities incurred the disapproval of the host government, the latter could be expected to terminate its mission. In other words, the Russian government had the power to dictate how the Assistance Group would be allowed to interpret its mandate. Thus, although the basic text of the Assistance Group's mandate remained unchanged, the tasks contained therein were henceforth effectively and substantially restricted in scope.

For a while during the first half of 1997, the Assistance Group continued to be involved in talks between Russian and Chechen representatives aimed at signing a detailed agreement on economic issues and peaceable relations. Of particular importance in this context were the two accords – a treaty on peace and principles of mutual relations and an agreement on economic cooperation – that were signed in Moscow on 12 May 1997 by Presidents Yeltsin and Maskhadov.⁹ Prolonged

negotiations were started in order to provide a settlement on the oil problem for the entire region, including transit through Chechen territory and the debts to the Chechen state-owned oil company, as well as the restoration of Chechnya's oil and chemical complex, and agreements were signed on 12 July and 9 September 1997. However, the numerous political and economic agreements proved to be very fragile and failed to make a difference in terms of practical implementation. The Chechen crisis remained unresolved. Negotiations, as envisaged in the Khasavyurt Agreement, on the political status of Chechnya were resumed on several occasions, but were eventually discontinued as no progress could be made in overcoming the main difference in principle, namely Chechnya's insistence on full independence. At the same time, the difficult – and gradually worsening – internal situation in Chechnya made it progressively more difficult to take any substantial steps towards either a political or an economic settlement. In retrospect, it would thus appear that the dialogue between Russian and Chechen authorities that should have rendered the Assistance Group's mediation role superfluous ('... carried out in full'), had soon run out of steam.

4.2 Tasks still to be accomplished

From mid-1997 the emphasis of the Assistance Group's work had changed from mediation to post-conflict rehabilitation and other points of its mandate. In addition to the Russian statement of 13 March 1997, other subsequent developments – notably the accords signed on 12 May 1997 – would necessarily entail a certain reorientation of the Group's further activities. This was also acknowledged publicly by the then head of the Assistance Group, Ambassador Rudolf Torning-Petersen, who in an interview with the news agency Interfax pointed out that the situation prevailing in Chechnya after the agreements reached between Moscow and Grozny would have an impact on the priorities of the OSCE Assistance Group's activities, adding that the main focus now would be to render humanitarian and practical assistance for the peaceful reconstruction of the republic. Despite the substantial scaling-down of the Assistance Group's role, the still operative parts of the mandate left significant tasks yet to be dealt with. The Russian statement of 13 March specifically identified three priority areas, namely

- monitoring of the human rights situation;
- assistance in establishing democratic institutions and in ensuring the return of refugees and displaced persons; and
- coordination of efforts in providing humanitarian aid.

In addition, there remained the task of supporting the creation of mechanisms guaranteeing the rule of law, public safety and law and order.

Furthermore, a number of problems were and remained crucial in the post-conflict rehabilitation process, including mine-clearing and a solution for ecological problems, especially regarding water and sewage treatment. From 1997 to 1999 the Assistance Group was involved in numerous activities to solve these and a series of other practical problems relating to general post-conflict rehabilitation needs. Without elaborating on the precise details, it should merely be noted that the Group's mandate remained sufficiently broad and flexible, and was related to still existing, real and pressing needs, to make it unnecessary to invent new tasks in order to justify the Assistance Group's continued existence. The withdrawal of other international bodies, leaving the OSCE as the only remaining international organisation with a representation in Chechnya, would soon lend yet another important dimension to its continued presence.

At the same time, one must note that developments in Chechnya from 1997 to 1999 made it progressively more difficult in practical terms for the Assistance Group to perform its tasks.

4.3 The deteriorating security environment: evacuation

Since 1997, the modalities of the Assistance Group's work had increasingly come to be defined by the security environment. For years, Chechnya had been a high-risk area, especially for foreigners not protected by the restraints that societal traditions impose on Chechens, including the clan system and the blood vengeance code. In addition to criminal hostage-taking, there was the constant danger of politically motivated assassinations, such as the murder of six Red Cross expatriate employees at Novye Atagi in December 1996, and the abductions in October 1998 of three British nationals and one New Zealander, whose severed heads were found on 8 December 1998. During 1998, the security situation in Chechnya had deteriorated to an extent which made it progressively more difficult for the Assistance Group to perform its tasks in a meaningful way, while at the same time observing acceptable standards of safety for its own personnel. Against the backdrop of ever-worsening socio-economic conditions, crime and unrest reached epidemic proportions. The political unrest was intermingled with militant religious fanaticism, organised crime and a general break-down of law and order, manifesting itself in ever more frequent outbursts of violence, assassination attempts and other acts of terrorism. In particular, hostage-taking and abductions for ransom money rose sharply and became an all-pervasive evil not only in Chechnya itself, but also in adjoining regions. Hostages were held under unbearable conditions: they were widely exploited as

slave labourers, and were frequently traded between criminal groups (including quasi-political organisations and their armed formations) as income-generating commodities. Expatriates – especially those representing organisations believed to be capable of raising large amounts of ransom money – became prime targets for the perpetrators of kidnappings. Therefore, virtually all international institutions left the region, terminating their previous activities or, at best, leaving it to their local sub-agencies or partners to carry on. Thus the OSCE Assistance Group – being the only remaining international body with a representation in Chechnya – gradually came to be regarded as an increasingly vulnerable and likely target for a possible onslaught by malevolent forces. (The term ‘malevolent forces’, as used in this context, would apply as a general description of groups engaged in the various acts of lawlessness and violence as described above, including intra-Chechen violence, as well as groups with a hostile attitude towards the presence of institutions perceived as pro-Russian or ‘Western’. Such groups also included the more extremist fringes of the separatist movement, with their unhealthy intermixture of organised crime, ultra-nationalism and militant Islamism – the latter with links to the external terrorist networks of the Taliban and al-Qaeda).

Extensive security measures notwithstanding, the Assistance Group was forced four times during 1998 to evacuate its expatriate staff from Grozny to Moscow. The last such evacuation, commencing on 16 December 1998, was subsequently – by decision of the OSCE chairman-in-office¹⁰ – extended repeatedly in view of the further deteriorating security situation. In order to ensure the continuity and regularity of the Group’s on-the-spot operations, working visits to Grozny by members of the Assistance Group were made three times during January to March 1999.¹¹ Events in early March 1999 gave evidence of a further grave deterioration of the overall security environment, and later developments only confirmed this unfortunate trend, with the Interior Minister of the Russian Federation in May issuing a general warning to any outsider staying or travelling in Northern Caucasus, as it was impossible to guarantee anyone’s safety against the threat of abduction.

As was announced at the OSCE Permanent Council meeting on 11 March 1999, the evacuation regime – although still meant to be a temporary measure – was tightened up to exclude any further travels to Chechnya by Assistance Group members. The Assistance Group henceforth continued to operate from Moscow, where temporary office facilities were established at the premises of the embassy of Norway. The understanding was that the Assistance Group would return to Grozny when the chairman-in-office was satisfied that significant improvements in the security situation had occurred. Pending such a development, the Assistance Group would be monitoring the political and security situation in Chechnya from its Moscow office, while at the same time directing the practical activities involving

the local staff at the Assistance Group's Grozny office, which – for the time being – remained fully operational with a complete infrastructure.¹²

4.4 Developments in 1999 – resumption of armed conflict

Since early in 1999, Chechnya repeatedly expressed the desirability of including a third party – preferably the OSCE – in a hopefully resumed negotiation process with the Russian authorities. In a number of negotiations with high-ranking Russian officials, the Assistance Group time and again confirmed its readiness to undertake such involvement if and when the parties should so desire.¹³ The prevailing view in Moscow, however, continued to follow the restrictive line expressed in the Russian statement of 13 March 1997, which maintained that the part of the Assistance Group's mandate related to mediation efforts had been carried out in full, and that no further third-party involvement in a resumed Russian–Chechen dialogue was envisaged.

Whatever prospects there might have been for a renewed mediation role for the Assistance Group were effectively dispelled by the events that took place during the second half of 1999: first, the hostilities unleashed by the incursions (from 7 August) into Dagestan of Chechen-trained armed groups led by the notorious warlords and organisers of terrorist acts, Shamiil Basaev and Al-Khattab, thereafter (from 3 September) extensive Russian air-bombings of Chechen territory (from 22 September also including the city of Grozny), and from 30 September the invasion of Chechnya by Russian ground forces, setting off an armed campaign which has yet (in 2010, 11 years on) to be brought to an effective or definitive conclusion.

By the end of 1999 the Assistance Group's functions had been reduced to an absolute minimum. Following the abandonment of its 'classical' role as mediator in 1997, for various reasons its role in the humanitarian assistance and human rights fields had also been scaled down considerably. Because of the renewed armed hostilities in Chechnya, in October 1999 the remaining Assistance Group's local staff in Chechnya had to be evacuated to neighbouring Ingushetia. All humanitarian aid projects had to be put on hold. From August 1999 the Assistance Group had also come under increasing criticism from the Russian authorities for its reporting, which included sensitive topics such as human rights violations perpetrated by Russia and appeals for assistance from Chechen authorities to the international community. Thus, at the end of September Russia protested that the Assistance Group, through its report, was extending its activities beyond its mandate. In response to the attitude of the Russian authorities, who were displaying a progressively more restrictive interpretation of the Assistance Group's mandate, the Group scaled down its coverage of human rights violations in the course of the military campaign in

Chechnya and reduced its report to a minimum. Nevertheless, relations with the Russian Federation Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to cool, as evidenced *inter alia* by a succession of Moscow newspaper articles – ostensibly using Foreign Ministry sources – criticising the Assistance Group's activities.

At the same time, the Russian authorities gradually adopted the view that agreements previously entered into – the 1996 Khasavyurt Agreement and the Russian–Chechen peace treaty of 12 May 1997 – were no longer legally binding, and renounced their recognition of the OSCE-sponsored presidential and parliamentary elections that had been held in January 1997.

In Istanbul, on 19 November 1999, the OSCE ended a two-day summit by calling for a political settlement in Chechnya and adopting a charter for European security. Until the Istanbul summit the OSCE – like most other bodies representing the international community – had been hesitant to openly criticise the Russian government for its actions in Chechnya. However, in view of the imminent humanitarian disaster resulting from the resumed hostilities, with approximately 200 thousand refugees spilling over the border into neighbouring Ingushetia and enduring appalling conditions, the situation could not be ignored. Although the summit reconfirmed the mandate of the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya and paved the way for the subsequent fact-finding visit (in mid-December 1999) of the OSCE chairman-in-office to the Northern Caucasus, the Russian government remained adamant that no political role was envisaged for the OSCE or its Assistance Group in the context of the conflict. Upon his return from the visit, the chairman-in-office made a four-point proposal to facilitate a solution to the conflict, stipulating the following:

- 1) An immediate cease-fire in and around Grozny;
- 2) The establishment of a dialogue between the parties, with OSCE participation;
- 3) A regional conference with the participation of the presidents of Dagestan, Ingushetia and North Ossetia, as well as Russian Federation and Chechen representatives;
- 4) The escalation of international humanitarian assistance to the region and improved coordination of such assistance.

This initiative was, however, rejected by Russia. In fact, the Istanbul summit decisively confirmed the already widely felt sentiment that any involvement by the OSCE in matters pertaining to Chechnya was thoroughly unwelcome. The summit confirmed a fundamental shift in Russian policies toward the OSCE. Thus, according to the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igor Ivanov, the summit marked a turning point in the Russian perception of the OSCE; having first been viewed as

an organisation that expressed Europe's collective will, it was henceforth seen as an organisation serving as a Western tool for 'forced democratisation'.¹⁴

4.5 Re-establishment of the Assistance Group as a field mission, and its eventual termination

The situation prevailing by the end of 1999 seemed to call for a reassessment of the Assistance Group's *raison d'être*. While the Group was supposed to be an OSCE field mission, it was in fact sitting idle in Moscow – more than 1.5 thousand kilometres away from its application area – with no apparent prospect of return. In addition to the practical and logistical obstacles, the scope for fulfilling its various tasks, as envisaged in its mandate – indeed, for performing any activities in terms of its mandate – was severely curtailed by restrictions laid down by the host country. Questions to be answered included: What were the prospects for a resumption of a relevant and meaningful role for the Assistance Group? How could the Assistance Group continue to make a difference? What was its actual or potential usefulness? What was the point in the Assistance Group's continued existence? Why not just resign oneself to the insurmountable realities, write off the losses, and turn the attention of the OSCE to assignments likely to have a more successful outcome?

The author concluded that, even under the prevailing (most adverse) circumstances, the long-term usefulness of the Assistance Group's assignments outweighed the short-term disadvantages, and that the Assistance Group was indeed making a difference. Appreciating the continuous assurances and expressions of support that it had received from numerous quarters, the Assistance Group could not help noting that this tiny fragment of an OSCE presence represented a measure, albeit modest, of *hope* in an otherwise gloomy situation. While the restoration of normal, peaceful conditions in this conflict-ridden and suffering region seemed a more remote prospect than ever, it seemed all the more important that hope be kept alive.

This also seemed to be the attitude of the OSCE Permanent Council and the incoming Austrian as well as subsequent OSCE chairmanships. The years 2000 to 2001 saw a series of efforts to have the Assistance Group re-established in the application area and to bring about a resumption of its activities in terms of its mandate. Special attention was given to the question of redeploying the Assistance Group back to Chechnya. Suitable premises were found in the Znamenskoye location in north-western Chechnya, an area which (unlike the remainder of the republic's territory) was assumed to be under firm federal control. However, in order to establish the conditions for a return of the Assistance Group to Chechnya, two basic prerequisites had to be met.¹⁵ First, the Russian authorities had to guarantee

the security and adequate protection of the Group and its members. Second, the status of the Assistance Group had to be clearly defined, especially as to immunity and security, in an agreement similar to those concluded with the governments of other countries where OSCE missions were deployed. The re-establishment of the Assistance Group as an operational field mission did, however, drag out, apparently owing to the reluctance (or perhaps inability) of the Russian authorities to provide such security arrangements as were deemed necessary. However, in a statement to the OSCE Permanent Council on 2 November 2000, the United States representative to the OSCE welcomed the news that the OSCE Secretariat and the Russian government were about to finalise an agreement on the security arrangements. In its statement, which also reflected a certain measure of disappointment and impatience with the Russian government's previous handling of the issue, the United States furthermore noted:

It is our expectation that once these arrangements are finalized, the way should be open for the prompt return of a continuous OSCE Assistance Group presence on the ground in Chechnya, operating under its 1995 mandate. We welcome the Russian government's apparent willingness to make this goal a reality.

We note Prime Minister Kasyanov's decree instructing Russian government ministries to facilitate the Assistance Group's return, and believe that this should be finalized and the Assistance Group returned to Chechnya now so that we can hear reports from it before our ministers meet.

It is our understanding that the Council of Europe now operates on a continuous basis in Znamenskoye, and we can only assume that the security situation would therefore allow the Assistance Group to do the same.

Like our EU colleagues, we can recall other occasions on which we have been promised the imminent return of the OSCE, sometimes based on promises directly to your Minister and as early as April of this year, only to have those hopes dashed when each of these promises dissolved for one reason or another. It is our hope and expectation that the assurances we are receiving now will not lead to similar disappointments.

Following extensive negotiations with the Russian authorities, a memorandum of understanding was eventually signed on 13 June 2001 with the Ministry of Justice, which undertook to ensure the security of the Assistance Group office in Znamenskoye. On 15 June, the OSCE chairman-in-office reopened the Assistance Group's office in Znamenskoye and underscored the need for full implementation of the Group's mandate, as approved in April 1995 by the OSCE Permanent Council. After its redeployment, the Assistance Group concentrated on normalising its presence in Chechnya, following an absence of more than two years, with an emphasis on monitoring the human rights situation and facilitating the delivery of

humanitarian aid to the victims of the crisis.¹⁶ However, the Assistance Group's mandate, which had originally been adopted in 1995 *ad interim*, was in 2001 changed to be renewed yearly.

As in previous years, during 2002 the Assistance Group remained the only independent field presence of international organisations in Chechnya.¹⁷ The mandate was not extended for 2003, however, and the Assistance Group ceased to exist at the end of 2002.

In a letter dated 18 January 2003 to the OSCE chairman-in-office, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, I. Ivanov, sought to clarify the circumstances related to the technical closing of the OSCE Assistance Group in the Chechen Republic. The Russian position was explained as follows:

Our position has been maximum transparent and clear since the beginning: to adjust the tasks of the Group to the situation in Chechnya which has substantially changed since the adoption of its mandate in 1995. Notwithstanding our proposals presented yet in November 2002, which gave to the Assistance Group the perspective to continue its work in 2003, unfortunately, it has not been possible to reach consensus. The outcome has not been a choice of ours.

Considering the existing procedures, since January 1, 2003 the Group has shifted to the phase of technical termination which will last until 21st of March this year. We render full assistance to the OSCE Secretariat and chairmanship to make this process run smoothly.

At the same time, as we pointed out many times, it does not mean that we automatically terminate our cooperation with the OSCE on the Chechen problem.

In his letter, Ivanov noted that Russia had forwarded to the OSCE's Bureau on Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (BDIHR) detailed information on preparations for a referendum, to be held on 23 March 2003, on the Constitution of Chechnya and elections to governing bodies at all levels in the Republic. Expressing the hope that the BDIHR would be able to render expert assistance in the monitoring of these activities, the letter concluded: 'As experience shows, permanent presence of the OSCE field missions is not essential at all for similar purposes.'

5 CONCLUSION

With the dissolution of the OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya as one's point of departure, it is easier to review the experience gained than to discern a passable road ahead.

Although not specifically mentioned in the Assistance Group's mandate, a significant reason for the continued OSCE presence in Chechnya was the *political* dimension of the mission's work. The OSCE presence constituted a political message

that Chechnya had not been forgotten by the much-maligned ‘international community’. For Chechnya, the Assistance Group was important as a channel of contact with the outside world. For the OSCE, the Assistance Group – even during its extended evacuation regime – fulfilled the functions of carrying out independent observations, analyses and assessments, and reporting on general political developments as well as on economic developments, including living conditions in the region. Thus, through its Assistance Group, the OSCE maintained a presence which enabled the organisation to monitor these developments on a continuous basis.

At the beginning of this article, broad questions of whether and in what way the OSCE as an ‘agent of the international community’ could contribute to the eventual resolution of the Chechen conflict, bringing peace and stability to the region, were raised. The answers to these questions may be coloured by a certain measure of wishful thinking. Although the OSCE may in fact be the international body best equipped for such a purpose, its limitations in this respect are obvious: it is an organisation that operates on the basis of the principle of consensus, and it can therefore only be as effective as its member states want it to be. If a major member state is a party to a particular conflict, and insists that this is a purely internal matter, progress is unlikely.

When considering the Chechen conflict from today’s *post festum* perspective (as far as the now defunct Assistance Group is concerned), it seems improbable that a situation will in the foreseeable future arise (as it did in 1995) in which Russia might avail itself of the good offices of the OSCE to seek a way out of the seemingly never-ending imbroglio.

All along, everybody has professed to agree that the conflict cannot be solved by military means alone, and that a *political* solution must be found. From the point of view of the Russian federal authorities, this challenge was presumably met and overcome by the constitutional referendum in 2003 and the subsequent elections which ushered in the Kadyrov regime. However, the assassination on 9 May 2004 of Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov could only testify to the continuing volatile situation and the continued absence of a political solution with a modicum of legitimacy. Later developments, whether the election on 30 August 2004 of Alu Alukhanov as Kadyrov’s successor, or the killing on 8 March 2005 of the last legitimately elected president, Aslan Maskhadov, did not entail any decisive change in the general depiction of the conflict. To a certain extent, Moscow has gradually transferred the internal political power to a group of former separatists, which rules the territory on Russia’s behalf, but only under partial control of Moscow. Thus, the conflict has largely assumed the character of a civil war – Chechen against Chechen – while at the same time thousands of federal Russian troops (perpetrating atrocities and suffering casualties) continue to be tied up within the Republic’s borders. Whether

the replacement of Alukhanov on 5 April 2007 with the late Kadyrov's son, the notorious armed-band leader and 'strongman' Ramzan Kadyrov, could be a precursor of fundamentally new developments, remains to be seen. So far, his Moscow-backed regime has not been able to shed its reputation for ruthlessness and abuses of human rights, let alone to facilitate the safe return of the hundreds of thousands of exiles.¹⁸ The murder on 7 October 2006 of the journalist Anna Politkovskaya reminded the outside world of the extreme danger entailed (and the extreme courage required) in reporting on the abuse of power and the atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population in Chechnya – a situation which shows no sign of improvement.

Leaving aside the question of the legitimacy of the political structures currently in place, it must be recognised that the achievement of a comprehensive political solution necessitates huge efforts on a number of fronts. Humanitarian needs must be alleviated, refugees and internally displaced persons must be given a safe return to what is left of their homeland, infrastructure must be rebuilt, and – most difficult of all – the distrust caused by the military campaign with its heavy toll of death and destruction must be dispelled. The protracted war of attrition, including the serial assassinations of separatist leaders – politicians, 'field commanders' and warlords (including out-and-out terrorists) alike¹⁹ – has hardly contributed to a positive development in this respect. It is not realistic to expect any quick and easy solutions.

Although a comprehensive political solution may not be within reach, much can still be done to help bring about some improvement in an otherwise complicated situation. If the security situation could be made tolerable, international NGOs with humanitarian or human rights agendas could be encouraged to involve themselves more directly in the region. To assist such NGOs in their beneficial activities was a priority task of the Assistance Group during its last year of existence. It could conceivably continue to be a positive contribution from other branches of the OSCE system. Even without any institutional presence in the region, the OSCE could maintain a readiness to offer its good services, if and when opportunities to make a contribution in areas similar to those envisaged in the original mandate of the Assistance Group become a more realistic proposition.

NOTES

- 1 See <http://www.osce.org/>
- 2 As quoted in the Introduction, Gall and De Waal (1997: xii).
- 3 Cf. the relevant passage in Skagestad (2000: 121–129).
- 4 This extract is from the editorial article entitled 'Chechnya is different' in the *International Herald Tribune* (from *The Washington Post*), 5 October 2001.

- 5 For a more thorough discussion of the prospective relevance of the international community and its agents in the context of the Chechen conflict, see Skagestad (2000: 122–124).
- 6 Cf. OSCE (1995: 2–3).
- 7 For a detailed account and analysis of the Assistance Group's mediation role, see Guldemann (1998: 135–143).
- 8 Statement of the Russian Federation, in OSCE (1997: Annex 3, agenda item 7(d)).
- 9 It should be noted that the peace treaty, in form as well as in substance, had a text which would normally be found only in agreements between sovereign states in the full international legal sense, as in the following excerpt: 'The High Contracting Parties, desiring to put an end to their centuries-old opposition, and endeavouring to establish sound, equitable and mutually advantageous relations, have agreed as follows: 1) That they renounce for ever the use or the threat of force in the resolution of any disputes between them. 2) That they will build their relations on the basis of generally recognised principles and standards of international law.' The treaty text, together with the fact that it was signed by the two presidents, for all obvious purposes in their respective capacities as heads of state, could easily be interpreted as a Russian *de jure* recognition of Chechnya as a sovereign state. That was certainly the view of the Chechen authorities, whereas the Russian side (see below) would subsequently denounce the treaty altogether.
- 10 As Norway held the OSCE chairmanship in 1999, the organisation's chairman-in-office during that year (which also coincided with the period when the author of this article held the assignment as the head of the Assistance Group) was the then Minister of Foreign Affairs of Norway, Mr Knut Vollebæk.
- 11 These working visits enabled the head of the Assistance Group to hold extensive talks and meetings with the Chechen authorities, including President Aslan Maskhadov and his press secretary Mairbek Vachagaev, First Deputy Prime Minister Turpal-Ali Atgeriev, Deputy Prime Ministers Khamzat Shidaev, Kazbek Makhachev, Alkazar Abdulkarimov, Akhmed Zakaev, Minister of Foreign Affairs Akhyat Idigov, Minister of Shariat State Security Aslambek Arsaev and his deputy Khasan Khatsiev, Speaker of the Chechen Parliament Ruslan Alikhadzhiev, Deputy Speaker Selam Beshaev, Deputy Attorney General Abu Arsukhaev, the Chief Mufti of Chechnya Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov (later to be installed by the Russian occupants as 'president' of the Chechen Republic and eventually assassinated on 9 May 2004), and others. Until July 1999 the post as the Chechen president's general representative in Moscow was held by Edelbek Ibragimov, who was subsequently replaced by President Maskhadov's former press secretary, Mairbek Vachagaev.
- 12 For a more extensive account of the Assistance Group's activities during 1999, see Skagestad (1999e: 211–223). For more detailed presentations and analyses, reference is made to the periodic reports to the OSCE Permanent Council submitted by the head of the Assistance Group, notably Doc. PC.FR/7/99, OSCE Secretariat (Vienna), 11 March 1999; Doc. PC.FR/18/99, OSCE Secretariat (Vienna), 24 June 1999; and Doc. PC.FR/30/99, OSCE Secretariat (Vienna), 21 October 1999.

13. These talks took place in the context of the Assistance Group's extensive contacts with Russian federal authorities, including meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Minister Evgeni Gusarov and Department Director Vladimir Chizhov) as well as numerous high-level meetings with other relevant interlocutors such as the (then) Minister of the Interior Sergei Stepashin (later to become prime minister), the (then) Minister of Nationalities Ramazan Abdulatipov, the FSB director and secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council Vladimir Putin (later to succeed Stepashin as prime minister, and eventually succeeding Boris Yeltsin as president), the deputy secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council Vyacheslav Mikhailov (who preceded as well as succeeded Mr Abdulatipov in the post of minister of nationalities), Duma members Vladimir Zorin and Mikhail Gutseriev, the Russian Federation's President's Representative to Chechnya Valentin Vlasov, the Russian Federation's Government's Representative to Chechnya Georgi Kurin, former secretary of the Russian Federation's Security Council and Russian Federation's chief negotiator Ivan Rybkin, and others. In addition, the Assistance Group maintained regular contacts with the Republic of Ingushetia's President Ruslan Aushev, who rendered the Group valuable support and protection on the regional level.
14. Ivanov (2002: 97–98).
15. Cf. OSCE (2000: 29–31).
16. For a more substantive account of the tasks performed by the Assistance Group upon its redeployment to Chechnya, see OSCE (2001: 36–38).
17. A detailed account of the Assistance Group's activities in 2002 is given in OSCE (2002: 36–38).
18. Indeed, other observers have been distinctly less charitable than the present author in portraying the vicious character of Ramzan Kadyrov and his regime.
19. In addition to presidents Maskhadov and Akhmat-Hadji Kadyrov, notable examples include their predecessor Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev (acting president 1996–1997, killed on 13 February 2004), former vice-president Vakha Arsanov (killed on 15 May 2005) and 'field commanders' (warlords) Arbi Barayev (killed on 25 June 2001), Ibn al-Khattab (killed on 20 March 2002), Movsar Barayev (killed on 26 October 2002), Salman Raduyev (killed on 14 December 2002), Ruslan Gelayev (killed on 28 February 2004) Abdul Khalim Saidullayev (killed on 17 June 2006) and Shamil Basayev (notorious perpetrator of a number of terrorist acts, killed on 10 July 2006).

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