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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

OSCE Fails to Gain Powers

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ASTANA, Kazakhstan — Unresolved conflicts across the former Soviet Union thwarted attempts by Europe's main security watchdog to adopt new powers Friday, sending world leaders home empty-handed from the first OSCE summit in more than a decade.

The 56-member state Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe could not agree on a new "action plan" to tackle conflicts after two days of talks that dragged into the early hours of Friday in Kazakhstan's windswept capital.

Instead, they signed the Astana Commemorative Declaration, which renewed their previous commitment to principles of a free and democratic security community from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

Thirty-eight heads of state traveled to Kazakhstan, the first former Soviet country to chair the OSCE. Many had already left by the time marathon talks wrapped up, leaving delegates to deliver some stinging messages about a lack of progress.

The United States said the adoption of a more meaningful declaration had snagged on old conflicts including Moldova's rebel Transdnestr region, Georgia's breakaway regions and the

Nagorno-Karabakh dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

"We could not accept an action plan at the first OSCE summit in 11 years that failed to adequately address the most serious and enduring threats to our security," a U.S. delegation representative said in closing remarks.

Failure to empower the OSCE underlined doubts among many that the uneasy mix grouping Western democracies with former Soviet republics has the teeth or the will to prevent conflicts and ensure adherence to even basic human rights.

"If we're going to have a text, let's have a text with real substance in it, which doesn't simply try and brush every awkward issue under the carpet," British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said.

The Czech delegation, summing up its position, said in a statement: "The action plan should have defined a practical way to continue to restore trust and confidence among OSCE participating states.

"This opportunity was lost. So was the relevance of the OSCE."

Sharp Rhetoric

A Russian delegation representative said "compromise became impossible due to the dogmatized approach by some participants to the negotiating process." He did not elaborate.

Russia came under pressure during the summit from both Georgia and Moldova for not withdrawing its troops from both countries' pro-Moscow rebel regions — a commitment made by the Kremlin during the last OSCE summit in Istanbul in 1999.

And far from its stated aim of narrowing the gap between Azerbaijan and Armenia on the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh, the summit drew sharp rhetoric from both sides after the worst year of skirmishes since a 1994 cease-fire.

Armenian President Serzh Sarksyan threatened to recognize the Armenian-backed mountain enclave as independent if Azerbaijan acted on its threat to use force to take the territory back.

Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has used the summit to promote his oil-rich nation and its futuristic capital, saved face with the signing of the Astana declaration and told reporters that the "historic" summit was a success.

"It demolished the decrepit wall between Europe and Asia and enriched the Helsinki spirit with the Astana spirit," he said.

The OSCE held its first summit in the Finnish capital during the Cold War in 1975.

Nazarbayev, a 70-year-old former steelworker who has run Kazakhstan for more than two decades, had earlier given the floor to Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi in an attempt to garner support for a declaration.

"By holding this OSCE summit, Kazakhstan is today becoming a hero in the world arena,

acquiring a widely deserved authority and prestige," Berlusconi said.

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