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MARGINS OF CONFLICT

The ECHR and Transitions to and from Armed Conflict

Edited by
Antoine Buyse
The European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) was drafted more than 60 years ago, in the wake of World War II and in the midst of fears that communist dictatorship would gain firmer ground in ever increasing parts of Europe. The Court has functioned for over 50 years as a guardian of the ‘engagements undertaken by the High Contracting Parties in the Convention’, as Article 19 ECHR so succinctly formulates it. The dark shadows of war have not fully receded however. Although the State Parties to the Convention have for the most part experienced unparalleled decades of peace, armed conflict has resurfaced time and again, from Northern Ireland to Cyprus and Turkey, but also beyond the territories of the State Parties to the ECHR. And with the demise of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s new waves of violence devastated parts of Europe, most violently in the States of the former Yugoslavia and in the Caucasus. Human rights, such as those enshrined in the European Convention, have not brought about the end of wars, but they have contributed to the strengthening of peace and they offer a myriad of tools to counter armed conflict and to deal with its aftermath.

This edited collection arose from a seminar held at Utrecht University in October 2009 under the aegis of the research focus on conflicts and human rights, in which both legal scholars and academics from other disciplines cooperate. Its aim was to address some of the salient issues regarding the use of the European Convention in periods of tension, which could both involve transitions from peace to armed conflict and vice versa. It thus adheres to a broad conception of transitions, which do not always concern the often-researched transition from war to peace but also the other way around. This reflects the reality in many States which oscillate between war and peace. It is important to emphasize that this volume does not focus on the period of armed conflict itself, with its particular connection of human rights to humanitarian law – such a topic would merit a book of its own. Rather it studies the margins of conflict, as the title of this volume indicates. Firstly, it seeks to explore which limits human rights put on European societies which are on the brink of armed conflict. In order to give the book a clear focus and coherence the various contributions centre on the ECHR from an internal perspective, shedding light on the particular challenges of both States and the European Court in addressing transitions in the margins of armed conflict. And secondly, it surveys the legal consequences of human rights violations committed during the armed conflict.
by looking at the aftermath of war. Thus it studies how transitions from and to war can be dealt with from a human rights perspective – materially, but especially procedurally. The procedural perspective has been adopted to shed light on an often overlooked element of this issue: procedural bars to litigation in Strasbourg often prevent the Court from addressing the merits. In addition, procedural elements of human rights obligations are often as crucial to policy latitude for States as material elements. These include issues such as when a state of emergency can be invoked to derogate from human rights, but also which procedural duties apply to States dealing with the aftermath of conflict. This collection obviously cannot exhaustively address all relevant aspects. Thus a number of salient and topical themes have been selected, without claiming exhaustive coverage.

The contribution of Judge Egbert Myjer – a lecture delivered at Utrecht at the occasion of SIM’s (the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights) anniversary – focuses on the interrelations between human rights and armed conflict. The ensuing essays relate to this issue from specific angles. Jan-Peter Loof delves into the specific function of the ECHR’s clause on states of emergency and war. The essay by Rick Lawson addresses which State is responsible and to what extent in times of armed conflict: the issue of jurisdiction. Yves Haeck and Clara Burbano Herrera address the practice of the Court’s short-term means of safeguarding human rights before and in situations of armed conflict through the use of interim measures. Marloes van Noorloos assesses to what extent the freedom of expression may be limited to prevent the escalation of violence into armed conflict. Marthe Lot Vermeulen looks at State obligations concerning one of the gravest human rights violations ensuing from conflicts: enforced disappearances.

My own chapter explores how the recent procedure of pilot judgments may help to address the massive human rights violations that armed conflicts often yield. It is hoped that this collection will contribute to a greater understanding of both the potential and limitations of the European Convention in trying to prevent armed conflict and in dealing with its consequences.

The contributions themselves raise a host of new and fruitful questions. In general the Strasbourg system of human rights supervision is limited in many ways in addressing the problems leading to and arising from armed conflict. How could the voice of human rights be made more audible on the ground in such a context? And more specifically, further research seems warranted on the extent to which states of emergency apply to interstate conflicts and how this interlinks with international humanitarian law. In addition, the territorial reach of the Convention may procedurally be the object of much debate, but the exact reach of material obligations extra-territorially is also a fertile field of research. It is hoped that further research on these important issues will follow in the future and that it can build upon the insights presented in this volume.
Finally, some words of thanks to the people without whom this book would not have come into existence. Sincere thanks are due to Professor Jenny Goldschmidt, director of the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights (SIM), who came up with the initial idea for this project and book, and has shown relentless support for it. Ineke Boerefijn, Anja Mihr, Peter Malcontent and Cedric Ryngaert – all researchers at Utrecht University – have reviewed the papers of the authors and offered valuable comments during the authors’ seminar. Many thanks to Laura Henderson who meticulously and efficiently did the language and reference editing of all the contributions – a Herculean undertaking in its own right. This project would not have been possible without the generous support of the Utrecht University Focus and Mass Programme ‘Conflicts and Human Rights’. And finally, I owe my gratitude to all the contributors to this volume.

This book is dedicated to all victims of armed conflict, for whom the European Convention will hopefully increasingly be both a beacon of hope and a shield of protection. Human rights treaties are neither swords nor ploughshares, but they can be important tools in the fight against the scourge of war.

**Antoine Buyse**
Utrecht, the Netherlands
October 2010
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