

The Parliamentary Dimension of the OSCE

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Abstract

This article explores the parliamentary dimension of the OSCE. As an independent organization the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE facilitates inter-parliamentary dialogue and advances the OSCE's goals of security and co-operation in its region. Parliamentary diplomacy, dialogue and election observation are the main tools the Parliamentary Assembly uses to implement the Helsinki Final Act's principles. With war, conflict and backsliding of democracy in the region the work of the Parliamentary Assembly is more important than ever.

Keywords

OSCE – Parliamentary assembly – parliamentary diplomacy – Ukraine war – election observation

Introduction

From the establishment of the OSCE¹ in 1975, the organization functioned without a parliamentary dimension for 16 years. The role of parliamentarians was only officially recognized in the 1990 Charter of Paris, which called for greater parliamentary involvement in the organization.² This wish for greater involvement was quickly realized, as the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) was established the following year by the Madrid Document.³ The PA was to bring plurality and promote the participation of national parliaments to the work of the OSCE – a goal it has successfully achieved. Since its establishment, the PA has grown from its original 245 parliamentarians from 34 parliaments to the current 323 parliamentarians from 56 parliaments⁴ and continues to promote its core values from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The PA also has 11 Partners for Co-operation.⁵

From its first moments to today, the PA has offered an effective platform for parliamentary diplomacy. It is through dialogue that the OSCE and its PA aim to prevent conflicts before they arise and resolve existing conflicts. Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine has notably challenged the very basis upon which the OSCE has been built. The full-scale war has been repeatedly condemned by the PA and calls for sustainable peace and accountability have been constant.

The PA also supports and strengthens democratic institutions within its region through dialogue and election observation missions. By co-operation between the governmental and parliamentary side of the OSCE, the PA supports the implementation of OSCE objectives in its participating States through current and new challenges.

1 Then known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Charter of Paris for New Europe, 21 November 1990, pp. 12-13, Retrieved 18 March 2025, <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>.

3 OSCE, The Madrid Document, 3 April 1991. Retrieved 18 March 2025, <https://www.osce.org/pa/40791>.

4 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), Member Countries. Retrieved 11 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/member-countries>.

5 OSCE PA, Partners for Co-operation. Retrieved 11 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/partners-for-co-operation>.

Parliamentary diplomacy and dialogue as a means to peace

The most notable strength of the OSCE PA lies in parliamentary diplomacy. While parliamentary diplomacy has no global definition there is a common understanding that it promotes dialogue, builds confidence and fosters mutual understanding in addition to acting as a catalyst for conversations and decision-making in international relations.⁶ Parliamentary diplomacy therefore offers a unique avenue to bridge divides, build trust and strengthen co-operation. It provides more freedom regarding topics to be discussed compared to governmental platforms, allowing parliamentarians to broaden the scope of dialogue on international relations. Dialogue is not only concentrated to parliamentary sessions but is also present outside the statutory meetings, for example in the meetings of the PA's ad hoc Committees and in international events and conferences organized by the parliaments of the participating States. It is through the connections built and conversations held that the work of the PA becomes even more effective.

Through parliamentary diplomacy the PA can offer an effective platform for venting and preventing tensions, fostering co-operation and reinforcing security where it is most needed. The parliamentarians of the PA play a vital role in bringing the principles of the OSCE to life, through election observation, field visits, mediation and advocacy but also by promoting the OSCE's core values and work in their own countries.

Parliamentary diplomacy is a part of the PA's everyday work. There has been a growing uncertainty in the OSCE region in the past few years due to a full-scale war, conflict and threats to democracy. In addition to Russia's war against Ukraine, the PA has utilized its tools to provide a platform for discussions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in Georgia following the 2024 parliamentary elections. Although not directly in the OSCE region,⁷ the PA has used parliamentary diplomacy even in discussions with Israeli and Palestinian authorities since the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – a case example on the OSCE PA approach to conflict

The OSCE Helsinki Final Act adopted 50 years ago includes the core principles guiding the relations between participating States. Refraining from the use of force, territorial integrity of States and respect for human rights amongst others have all been inscribed in the document.⁸ In February 2022 those principles were grossly violated, when Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine. This war changed the European security situation overnight and had a major impact on the functioning of the PA as well. Since the start of the war the PA has remained strong in its support to Ukraine. The PA condemned the actions of the Russian Federation, but unlike the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,⁹ the PA did not suspend it from the organization, due to a lack of consensus and viable mechanisms to do so, following from the organization's founding idea of inclusion.

6 Durbek Sayfullaev, 'Parliamentary Diplomacy in Making of Foreign Policy', in the Advanced Science Journal, 2016, Issue 1, pp. 52-54; Andrea Gawrich, 'A Bridge with Russia? The Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and of the Council of Europe in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis', in Stelios Stavridis and Davor Jancic (eds.), Parliamentary Diplomacy in European and Global Governance, Brill & Nijhoff, Leiden, 2017, pp. 156-173.

7 Israel is a Partner for Co-operation in the OSCE: OSCE PA, Partners for Co-operation. Retrieved 2 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/partners-for-co-operation>.

8 OSCE, Helsinki Final Act, 1 August 1975. Retrieved 31 March 2025, [Helsinki Final Act | OSCE](#).

9 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 'The Russian Federation can no longer be a member State of the Council of Europe, PACE says', 15 March 2022. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8638/the-russian-federation-can-no-longer-be-a-member-state-of-the-council-of-europe-pace-says>.

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, the PA condemned the annexation¹⁰ but decided to conduct special dialogue meetings between the Russian and Ukrainian parliamentarians. These meetings are one of the clearest examples of parliamentary diplomacy: an international institution provided the opportunity for bilateral dialogue between representatives of the two parties to the conflict in order to resolve the dispute.¹¹

To this day, the PA continues to support the government, civil society and people of Ukraine as they continue to face the immense challenges brought on by Russia's ongoing war. In 2023 the PA established the Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine to further consolidate the PA's practical and political efforts in support of Ukraine.¹² It also appointed three Special Rapporteurs focusing on different aspects of support for Ukraine and bringing in first-hand information to the PA.¹³ The parliamentarians of the assembly keep Ukraine at the forefront of the conversations and meetings. In addition to the unwavering support for Ukraine, and despite the Russian delegation's current decision not to participate in the PA meetings, the PA keeps the door open for Russian parliamentarians to join the conversation and resolve the war in accordance with the Helsinki Principles – through peaceful settlement of disputes. Even though keeping the door open for Russian participation may be an uncommon approach, it is a testimony to the PA's dedication to dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy.

Since the OSCE Ministerial Council's decision-making is based on consensus,¹⁴ the decision-making on the governmental side has been heavily impeded by the war in Ukraine. The main decision-making body of the OSCE PA, however, has a bit more room for manoeuvre due to its parliamentary nature, giving it more freedom in decision-making. For example, unlike the OSCE, the PA has been able to agree on and adopt a budget, ensuring that its work can continue effectively. The PA has been able to officially adopt declarations and resolutions condemning Russia's war against Ukraine. This has enabled the PA to take a stronger stand than its governmental counterpart and actively continue its institutional work towards peace in Ukraine.

Election observation missions as a key tool for strengthening democracy

In addition to parliamentary diplomacy, election observation missions (EOM) remain one of the most important and visible tools in the PA's toolkit for supporting and strengthening democratic institutions within the OSCE region. The parliamentarians of the PA play an important role during election day observation, monitoring the conduct of the election. EOMs also bring international visibility to the election processes, which is especially relevant in elections that are not as democratic and fair as they ought to be according to the OSCE's commitments.

10 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), 'OSCE parliamentarians approve Russia resolution amid debate on Ukraine', 1 July 2014. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2014/osce-parliamentarians-approve-russia-resolution-amid-debate-on-ukraine>.

11 Gawrich (n 6), p. 169.

12 OSCE PA, 'OSCE parliamentarians meet in Vancouver for Annual Session, establishing a new parliamentary working group on Ukraine', 30 June 2023. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2023/osce-parliamentarians-meet-in-vancouver-for-annual-session-establish-new-parliamentary-working-group-on-ukraine>.

13 OSCE-PA, 'Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine'. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/activities/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ukraine>.

14 OSCE, Rules of Procedure of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2006, Part II A(2-3). Retrieved 2 April 2025, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/0/22775.pdf>.

The PA is deeply committed to its EOMs. EOMs are organized in cooperation with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). ODIHR is responsible for the long-term observation, assessing the entire electoral process whereas the OSCE PA contributes to short-term observation, especially on election day.¹⁵ The cooperation combines ODIHR's technical expertise with the political insight of elected parliamentarians. For example, in 2024 the PA, in co-operation with ODIHR, deployed eight EOMs to six different participating States. Hundreds of parliamentarians participated in the missions, and the PA even deployed its largest mission ever to the United States of America, with a total of 167 observers.¹⁶ The EOMs can provide a platform for successful co-operation even for parliamentarians from two countries in conflict. For example, in the 2024 EOM in Uzbekistan the Head of OSCE PA delegation was the Head of the Armenian delegation to the OSCE PA while the role of Special Co-ordinator was held by the Head of the Azerbaijani delegation to the OSCE PA.¹⁷ At the time of writing the PA plans to observe elections in Albania and Moldova in the first half of 2025, continuing its active efforts in ensuring democratic elections. In addition to cooperating with ODIHR, the PA has an important role to coordinate EOMs with other observing institutions, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.¹⁸

The PA's work is not done after the elections. The PA consistently advocates for the importance of addressing the concerns highlighted in its joint statements with ODIHR with all relevant stakeholders. It assesses and encourages the implementation of its recommendations. Countries are not left alone to deal with the recommendations after the observation mission has concluded. Instead, the PA offers long-term support, including follow-up visits with ODIHR. In addition to supporting democratic processes, the long-term work on elections aims to strengthen public trust in the electoral processes. OSCE PA and ODIHR observers often engage in cooperation and information exchange with domestic observers, sharing expertise on electoral processes and gaining local insight. The observing organizations, along with the OSCE PA, also need to make sure that their methods of observation stay up to date to respond to new ways of election interference, such as disinformation, emphasized by social media, and deep fakes.

New challenges in the OSCE region

The OSCE region faces pressing and evolving new challenges. At the core of the OSCE's mission is the belief that security is best achieved through dialogue, mediation and co-operation. However, the challenges of today go well beyond what the Helsinki Final Act signatories could have foreseen 50 years ago. The scope of disinformation and the increased questioning of democratic procedures such as elections are destabilizing democracies in an unforeseen way. Simultaneously, cyberattacks, abusing critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and weaponizing migration are more and more common.

15 OSCE, Co-operation Agreement Between the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2 September 1997. Retrieved 27 June 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/ru/dokumenty/election-observation/election-observation-reports/documents/1603-osce-co-operation-agreement-1997/file>.

16 OSCE PA, 2024 Election Observation Annual Report, p. 1, 2024. Retrieved 27 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-reports/brochures/5136-osce-pa-election-observation-overview-2023-1/file>.

17 OSCE PA, International Election Observation Mission Uzbekistan – Parliamentary Elections, 27 October 2024, p. 18. Retrieved 17 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/uzbekistan/statements-31/5102-2024-parliamentary-4/file>.


18 OSCE PA, How observation works. Retrieved 4 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/activities/election-observation/how-observation-works>.

The impacts of climate change are becoming more severe, exacerbating resource scarcity and displacement, and therefore directly affecting the stability of the OSCE region. Artificial intelligence is reshaping security – from cyberattacks to new forms of armed warfare and easily spreading disinformation to offering opportunities. The erosion of trust in multilateral institutions and diplomacy has become more and more evident in recent years, challenging the effectiveness of such institutions' work.

These challenges need to be addressed head on, as they will only amplify existing challenges, and complicate co-operation amongst participating States. The PA will need to adopt policy changes, ensure coordinated responses, promote best practices and deliver practical solutions to tackle new challenges. Participating parliamentarians should bring the message of the PA to their national parliaments and executive authorities to ensure a more effective response.

Conclusions

The OSCE PA plays a vital role in interparliamentary co-operation in the field of security and human rights. Its dedication to parliamentary diplomacy, dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes will not perish despite the current and new challenges in its area. In a time of increasing uncertainty, parliamentary diplomacy should be further strengthened, as it can truly make a difference. OSCE PA members are uniquely positioned to promote the OSCE values in their national parliaments and raising the organization's profile through their own work. In addition to condemning actions that go against the Helsinki Principles and adopting resolutions, the PA should actively engage in dialogue from early on instead of isolating those it disagrees with. It should find ways to bring countries together to achieve peace. Furthermore, the PA's work has to continue after peace is reached, playing a role in upholding peace and stability in the OSCE region. The OSCE should make better use of the PA's tools, and the two sides of the organization should increase their co-operation to further improve the OSCE's effectiveness. Even 50 years after their adoption, the Helsinki Principles are as current as ever and the PA will continue its important work to support, promote and advocate for their realization.



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