

# What if the OSCE did not exist?

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**Keywords:** European Security - Peace - Ukraine - Russia

DOI: 1058866/FDWQ3654

*This article is part of the Special Issue on “The OSCE at 50: Reflections on security, cooperation and human rights”, published on a rolling basis between July and November 2025. The Special Issue was curated and edited by Walter Kemp and Christian Strohal, Security and Human Rights Monitor Editorial Board members and guest editors-in chief.*

## Abstract

Currently many politicians act as if the OSCE didn't exist. That leads to a fragmented debate about the future of European security. The debates are taking place separately within different groupings be it in Europe, as well as between the US and Russia. Competing visions of how security in Europe should be organised arise and have a direct effect on the negotiations to end the war against Ukraine. This war is embedded in a complex set of conflicts on at least three levels with different parties pursuing different objectives. A way out could be to focus on the common question: "What would the OSCE look like if we had to reinvent it today?"

## What if the OSCE did not exist?

For many people in the countries that are currently participating states in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) it would not come as a surprise if this organisation did not exist in the first place. Approximately 30 per cent of all respondents in a survey conducted in 14 OSCE member countries, either could not or would not say whether the organisation should play a bigger role in the future, or did not know the OSCE at all.<sup>1</sup> This is not a shocking result, since the organisation is not at the forefront of the current geopolitical shifts, but rather on the sidelines. What should concern us more is the fact that many decision-makers act as if the organisation did not or should not exist.

On one hand, too much blame is placed on the OSCE, as if it should have been able to stop Russia's war against Ukraine, and as a result of not doing so, it has now lost its relevance. On the other hand, there is too little energy put into the question, of how a system like the OSCE could be put in use today. Let me illustrate this point with the example of the current efforts to start negotiations towards peace in Ukraine.

As shown in our Peace Matrix<sup>2</sup>, Russia's war against Ukraine is part of a complex intersection of interconnected levels. One can imagine these levels as Matryoshka dolls, nested inside one another. At the core of Russia's current war against Ukraine, there is the direct and most obvious level: between Ukraine and Russia. Any negotiation towards peace needs to be dealt with between these two countries.

The next Matryoshka doll is the level between Europe and Russia. Since the EU and NATO collectively, as well as nearly all European states individually, support Ukraine in its defence against Russia, there is the need for a negotiation track addressing the security interests of these countries vis-à-vis Russia, and vice versa. On the other hand, with the war against Ukraine, Russia aims to change the security architecture in Europe.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, Moscow is also affected by how Europeans organise their security, whether in the Black Sea or along the borders between Russia and its neighbouring European states. Therefore, the negotiations towards peace in Ukraine need to take place on this level as well.

The third level to consider in the peace negotiations is the agenda between Russia and the United States (US). Washington is currently alternating between supporting Ukraine and being a neutral me-

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1 Katsioulis et al (2025), Security Radar 2025. Europe - Lost in Geopolitics, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Vienna, download: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/21865.pdf>

2 Katsioulis/Kemp/Weiss (2025), Peace Matrix, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Vienna, download: [https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Projects/Conversations-on-European-Security.pdf](https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects/Conversations-on-European-Security.pdf)

3 Alexey Yusupov (2025), Ukraine Verhandlungen. Was will Putin?, in: IPG, Download: <https://www.ipg-journal.de/rubriken/aussen-und-sicherheitspolitik/artikel/alle-auge-auf-moskau-8160/>

diator between both parties. It tries to play two vital roles in this war at the same time. The US affects not only what happens directly on the battlefield, but is also the main point of reference for Russia. The influence of the US in NATO decision-making and military posture, the bilateral strategic stability dialogue with Russia, and its ability to grant Russia the respect it seeks make this level of negotiations indispensable.

It can be argued that even this level is not the final one, and that the conflict solution should be part of a global geopolitical discussion, taking into account the positions of China, Turkey, India and other major players. This seems like a helpful, but not an indispensable, level of negotiation for reaching peace in Ukraine; therefore, we have set this dimension aside in our considerations..

To make matters even more complicated, the three negotiation levels include three to four different objectives that cover the different dimensions of the Russian war against Ukraine: the first objective is deconfliction, the second is the sovereignty of Ukraine, and the third, overarching objective is a European security order. By combining the levels of negotiation with the different objectives, we created a matrix that organises the different aspects needed for conflict resolution in Europe.

Embedding the Russian war in this structure allows us to identify the different elements that have to be dealt with to achieve a lasting solution. The matrix makes it possible to position these elements according to the levels at which they need to be addressed and the objectives they serve, breaking them down into topics for the negotiation process. Some of these elements are already being realised: for example, the 'issue-focused back-channels' between Russia and Ukraine to deal with POW exchanges or similar smaller matters contributing to deconfliction. The same applies for the reconstruction of Ukraine, which is already being addressed in international conferences as well as agreements, mainly between Ukraine and Europe, contributing to the sovereignty of Ukraine.

This matrix illustrates why negotiations focused just on one of the identified levels, with narrow objectives in mind, will likely fail to achieve a sustainable peace in Ukraine or Europe. At the same time, it helps visualise how many obstacles exist on this path. In this context, the negotiation parties hold largely irreconcilable positions. However, this is something to be expected in a situation where the largest landwar is being fought in Europe since World War II. Apart from that, there are four main challenges that need to be tackled:

- First, where to start and how then to sequence the different topics on the negotiation agenda. Some of the necessary elements are connected with each other, some can be addressed separately and some elements will be identified by one or the other party as precondition to go to the next. Thus, this is not just a procedural question, but already the first step of the negotiations.
- Second, an even more challenging issue is how Ukraine, Europe and the US, as parallel interlocutors of the Russian side, can harmonise their approaches and ensure that they are not going to be played against each other. This illustrates why, in addition to the negotiations with Russia, there needs to be a track on the Western side to align positions, a task not made easier by the current approach of the Trump administration.
- Third, directly related to the previous challenge and politically difficult to answer is the question of who will represent Europe in negotiations on the issues at this level. Neither the EU nor NATO speak for the entirety of the involved countries. Impromptu coalitions of the willing might offer a solution, but since they are only loosely organised, they might be difficult to sustain throughout the negotiation process, which will most probably take more than just a few months.
- Fourth, could this whole process of different negotiations help achieve a stable European security order, and how would it do so?

The last challenge leads us back to the initial question of “What if the OSCE did not exist?” The Finnish President, Alexander Stubb, has addressed this question in an interview with *Le Monde* in December 2024. He said that Europe is faced with a choice between “the Yalta moment or the Helsinki moment in international relations”<sup>4</sup>. This describes the difference between a European security order determined by the rule of big powers and one that is built on cooperation amongst equal and sovereign states.

To put this more pointedly: If the Helsinki Final Act had never been agreed upon and the OSCE had never come into existence, and if the logic of Yalta still applied, the negotiation described above, as well as the coordination between the different levels, would not be so complicated. It would be a world where might makes right, and Europe is divided into spheres of influence dominated by the global powers: the United States in the West, and Russia in the East. Any conflict between the two blocs or spheres would be dealt with at the highest level of our matrix, just as in Yalta. The direct talks between Presidents Putin and Trump in Alaska in August 2025 mirror this logic already, especially if we take into account that Ukrainians and Europeans were only involved after the fact.

This approach seems to come rather close to what Vladimir Putin envisions for the current war: a table where the US and the Russian presidents negotiate, and everyone else must fall in line and follow whatever the two patrons decide. Similar to the Cold War, the main objectives would be a quick de-confliction to avoid the risk of war between the opposing blocs, as well as the stabilisation of European security to avoid further escalation. Ukraine’s sovereignty would be subject to these priorities and subordinated to higher goals.

However, the years since Russia’s full-scale attack on Ukraine have shown that the idea of great powers determining the fate of smaller countries belongs to a bygone era. The agency of the Ukrainian government and people, as well as that of a broad coalition of European countries opposing this attack, signal that de-escalation and stability cannot override the values of self-determination and sovereignty in Europe. Indeed, this is what Ukraine is fighting for.

This creates a coordination problem and a dilemma of compromise. Since managing the conflict and ending of the war requires parallel negotiations on at least three levels, meaningful coordination between these negotiation rounds or tracks becomes an important task. Outside mediators can only provide limited guidance in such processes. A common set of principles and a shared understanding about the indivisibility of European security could frame it in a more targeted manner.

The dilemma between stability and sovereignty, and between de-escalation and self-determination, will remain at the heart of the differences between Russia and most parts of Europe. Therefore, a set of shared guardrails to alleviate the tension between these principles will be needed in the future, whether through CSBMs, verified arms-control measures, or a stable network of direct military and political networks to manage emerging issues between the warring parties. The aforementioned are all proven and tested instruments in the toolbox of the OSCE.

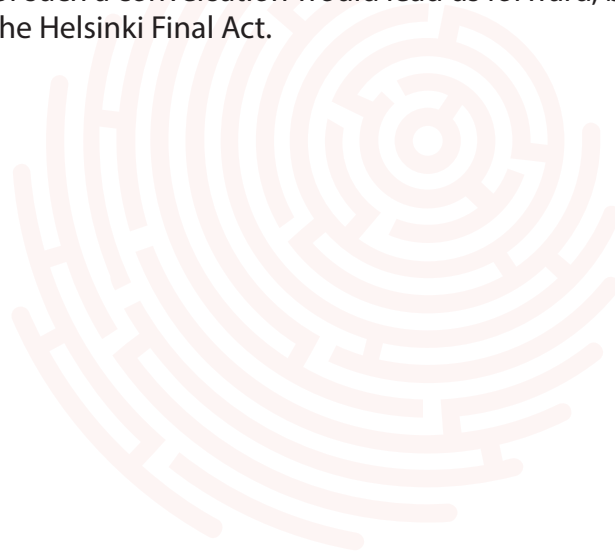
In other words, if the OSCE did not exist, there would arise the need to develop a set of principles or an institution similar to the one already established in Vienna. This would not resolve the immediate challenge of initiating a negotiation process to end the Russian war against Ukraine, since even the existing institutional structures are unable to do so. However, it might stimulate a discussion amongst all interested parties about their vision for future European security.


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4 [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/12/09/finland-s-president-stubb-europe-must-choose-between-yalta-moment-and-helsinki-moment\\_6735782\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/12/09/finland-s-president-stubb-europe-must-choose-between-yalta-moment-and-helsinki-moment_6735782_4.html)

At the moment, these debates are taking place separately within different groupings in Europe, whether in NATO, the EU, the European Political Community or between Russia and Belarus. The outcome will be competing visions of how security in Europe should be organised. In the context of an ongoing war, this is inevitable. However, history teaches us that competing or even clashing visions of security must be reconciled to avoid future conflicts or wars flaring in contested areas.

Therefore, the current situation of an ongoing war in Europe, in which politicians act as if the principles agreed upon and enshrined in the OSCE do not exist or are irrelevant, misses a necessary element. Parallel to the newly starting negotiations and the developing visions of European security, there needs to be forward thinking about how to accommodate all of these visions on the common continent. Neither the Helsinki Final Act nor the Paris Charter, or other documents of the OSCE, have stopped the Russian attack on Ukraine. This underlines a renewed urgency to acknowledge the differing visions of European security, understand the inherent danger of escalation, and manage these visions non-violently. Falling back into the world of Yalta or the 19<sup>th</sup> century will not solve this problem. The genie of sovereignty and agency of all countries is already out of the bottle. Asking “What if the OSCE did not exist?” is therefore a lazy question. A more challenging question, which might even help us shape European security in the future, is: “What would the OSCE look like if we had to reinvent it today?” The conclusions of such a conversation would lead us forward, building on the rather successful first 50 years since the Helsinki Final Act.





This article was published by the Security and Human Rights Monitor (SHRM).

Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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