

A small state perspective on the importance of the Helsinki Final Act

Maria-Pia Kothbauer-Princess von und zu Liechtenstein

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Abstract

Representing her country for nearly 30 years at the OSCE – and at the UN in Vienna as well as in Austria bilaterally and finally also in the Czech Republic – Her Serene Highness Maria-Pia Kothbauer-Princess von und zu Liechtenstein has exemplified quiet and principled diplomacy like few others. With her clear view of the issues that really matter, the Ambassador always provided avenues for dialogue and practical solutions, especially where others might be tempted to divert multilateral work for short-term gains. Doyenne of the OSCE diplomatic corps for many years, she also proved an invaluable partner for new “arrivals” as well as longer-term colleagues.

This text is an excerpt from her farewell speech to the OSCE Permanent Council delivered on 24 July 2025 in Vienna.

Excerpt from farewell speech

The past 29 years of working in and for the OSCE have meant a lot to me.

It was the CSCE process and the courage it gave to so many on both sides of the Iron Curtain to strive for change – for freedom and democracy - that fascinated me as a high school-student and sparked my interest in diplomacy.

The defining feature of foreign policy in my childhood, which I spent in Vienna, was the Iron Curtain - the experience of living on the edge of the Free World, of witnessing so many people fleeing from oppression, torture, and lack of freedom, but also the fear that once President Tito dies, Soviet troops would make their way through Eastern Austria into Yugoslavia to fill the vacuum and then remain there.

The velvet revolutions of 1989 were moments of great joy on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

The fall of the Iron Curtain alleviated existing tensions and opened new perspectives in Europe. These new perspectives were also decisive for Liechtenstein’s foreign policy and paved the way for our country into European structures.

With a history of over 300 years within the same borders, Liechtenstein is one of the oldest states in the OSCE. What gave us this resilience, tested as it has been over centuries? It is not the strength of an army, nor the wealth of natural resources, nor economic power. It is rather the internal balancing of interests that has enabled us to become a modern democracy; the self-determination of our people, who express themselves in several referenda each year and who, through hard work, have built up prosperity.

It is also the attention we pay to the good relations with our neighbours – Switzerland and Austria – to solidarity and cooperation within international organizations, and to the commitment to the rule of law, both domestically and in international relations.

Liechtenstein is successful as long as it adheres to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act and the Paris Charter and as long as it can rely on these being respected by others. Liechtenstein was therefore a natural founding member of the CSCE in 1975.

Since the brutal war of aggression launched by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, the foundation of cooperative security, which we all built together from the bitter experiences of the 20th century, has been shattered. And it is far from certain that we will succeed in reviving the OSCE as an instrument of cooperative security.

Given this threatening environment, for the first time in its history, Liechtenstein is developing a national security strategy. Its aim is not only to better prepare us for emerging challenges to our security, but also to strengthen social cohesion, protect society from disinformation and polarization, and to promote our values: democracy and the rule of law.

Liechtenstein's commitment to a rules-based, value-driven multilateral world order will remain a central pillar of our efforts to safeguard both our own security and that of our wider community of states. The OSCE will therefore continue to be a natural and essential partner for Liechtenstein in the future.

We firmly believe in the value of the OSCE – its principles, and its toolbox – even though we are well aware that the OSCE was unable to prevent the dramatic rifts in our continent.

At a time when countries are increasing their military spending to defend themselves against aggression, reinforcing multilateralism is more important than ever.

The success of Liechtenstein's economy is rooted in the innovative strength of its small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Likewise, it is often the smaller and medium-sized states that keep the OSCE running: taking on chairpersonships, leading working groups, contributing disproportionately to the extra-budgetary funds, building bridges, and driving innovation. They provide the broad shoulders of our organization and count among the most faithful implementers of our OSCE commitments.

This is not naive foreign policy. It is based on the experience that lasting peace always depends on a balance of interests and broadly accepted rules.

I thank all those who continue to stand firm for the OSCE and its values; who do not allow themselves to be discouraged; who work for freedom, peace, and for our principles. I am convinced that this effort is worthwhile, because these principles speak to a deep desire of all people.



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