

The OSCE and a new style of diplomacy

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Introduction

Our world faces a cascade of crises defying analysis and forecasting. We witness polarization within and between societies, a loss of trust in our ability to influence the course of events, a confusion that hinders progress in all areas.

Simone Weil wrote:¹ “The problem of peace, both international and social, has never been completely stated.” Robert Schuman believed that “the peace of the world cannot be maintained without creative efforts commensurate with the scale of the threat.”² In this article, I try to present a more complete statement of the facts; different narratives of 20th century history and post-Cold War history should not prevent us from digging a well of new experience; better theories of international relations can emerge from better relationships.³ In Europe today, creative efforts after the pattern of Robert Schuman should focus initially on the orientation and methodology of diplomacy.

Speaking in Berlin on 22nd November 2021, Finland’s former President Niinistö spoke of “the letter, the model, and the spirit of Helsinki” and drew attention to the potential significance of this diplomatic legacy in today’s global context. The President’s vision was widely shared in the decade prior to 2022.⁴ As of now (May 2025), there are signs that disillusionment has set in “east of Vienna” as well as in the west. It is feared that the Helsinki process and the Charter of Paris became one-sided, “the scripture of international liberalism.”⁵ I hope to show that a reimaged OSCE can work for everyone, in line with the thinking of Walter Kemp among others.⁶

There is presumably a possibility that a UN/OSCE mission will monitor a future line of contact in Eastern Ukraine, as happened under the Minsk agreements. The OSCE has competencies that can play a role in reconstruction. Whether or not this happens, a bigger question remains open. I present for consideration a scenario in which the OSCE, with its broad agenda, flexibility, regional scope, and values-led approach to international relations, is reimaged as an innovative “space of shared projection” in which to deliberate about the future.⁷

Central to this argument is that a Helsinki-style dialogue focussed on the place of Europe within the dialogue of civilizations can be taken forward separately from our day-to-day negotiations elsewhere on specific topics. The goal of a “reimaged OSCE” is not to cancel older narratives or to replace existing structures. On the contrary, I am proposing a new narrative and an additional investment. As a result of this investment, existing institutions such as NATO and the European Union can better advance their original purposes. In becoming the advocate and anchor of a wider European zone of peace and economic cooperation, the European Union can discover a new energy.

1 In her essay “The Power of Words.” The essay was written during the Spanish Civil War and is available in several anthologies including Simone Weil, *The Power of Words* (Penguin 2020)

2 The Schuman Declaration is available on the website of the Robert Schuman Foundation at www.robert-schuman.eu/en/declaration-of-9-may-1950

3 Cf. Mai'a K. Davis Cross, *International Cooperation Against All Odds/The Ultrasocial World*. Oxford University Press. 2024

4 See for example: “Back To Diplomacy: Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project, November 2015”

5 Vladislav Zubok, *The World of the Cold War: 1945-1991*. Pelican, 2025.

6 Security Through Cooperation, Routledge, 2022

7 As described by Jonathan White, *In the Long Run/The Future as a Political Idea*, Profile Books, London, 2024

Historical perspectives: (i) global history

Francis Fukuyama's thesis concerning the "end of history" presents the triumph of liberal democracy as the main story of the 20th century. For the jury of humanity, the emancipation of peoples is a bigger story. Seamus Heaney describes the onset of the 21st century as an "aftermath", following colonialism and world wars.⁸ Heaney invites us to imagine the time-line of history in a way that places us at the beginning of a new adventure.

Part of that adventure is a sustained cross-cultural dialogue on human values in the light of our most consequential challenges. In 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution establishing the International Day for Dialogue among Civilizations.⁹ This initiative strengthens the UN Alliance of Civilizations promoted in 2005 by Türkiye and Spain, and was endorsed by the World Summit in that year.¹⁰ The UN Secretary-General associates inter-civilizational dialogue with support for the Pact for the Future adopted in September 2024.¹¹

A global dialogue that, in Seamus Heaney's language, "credits political possibilities" would start from the fact that 800 million fellow human beings live close to starvation. It would take account of our responsibility to promote the ecological and climatic conditions on which life depends. The current focus west and east of Vienna on "re-armament" and old-style economic growth defers, de facto, a re-evaluation of the global economy and much-needed financial reform.

Liberal democracy has understood itself as a system or a set of rules; others think of their societies more in terms of an evolving cultural tradition or a civilization. This distinction should not become a dichotomy. Democracy, as much as any other political dispensation, depends on cultural conditions that it cannot itself generate or guarantee. There is always a dialogical relationship between the granular provisions of the law and an underlying ethos or sense of direction.¹² Those of us who believe in liberal democracy should be willing to go to the roots of our civilization to ask what democracy at its best could and should mean.¹³

Historical perspectives: (ii) post-Cold War history

The premise of the CSCE was that we can work towards a society of states in which the quality and closeness of relationships will make war less and less thinkable. Today, the institutional memory of this project has faded. We in the European Union often picture ourselves as participants in an existential contest – extending the geographical radius within which our way of life is "future-proofed" and facing down threats from forces perceived as too distant from our way of thinking to permit serious dialogue.

Today, western democracies are facing, not so much a fork in the road, as a clash of "imaginaries". On

8 Heaney, S. (1995). *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture 1995*. Oldcastle: The Gallery Press.

9 <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/78/286>. In March 2025, the General Assembly established an International Day of Peaceful Coexistence and an International Day of Hope: <https://press.un.org/en/2025/ga12676.doc.htm>

10 <https://unis.unvienna.org/unis/en/pressrels/2005/ga10407.html>

11 <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2024-11-26/secretary-generals-remarks-the-opening-session-of-the-10th-united-nations-alliance-of-civilizations>

12 See my article "The Böckenförde Dictum, Aristotle's *Koinōnia*, and the Debate on the Future of Europe," *Journal of Law and Religion*, 37 (3): 1-13. Cambridge. 2022. Also my chapter, "Humanitas for the 21st century: The role of religion in a values-led public discourse on global challenges," in Kollontai, P. and Yore, S. (eds.), *Religion in Diverse Societies*, Routledge, 2025.

13 A recent project at our Centre in Dublin City University addressed this theme: <https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/inline-files/Report%20-%20final%20%283%29.pdf>

the one hand, is the imaginary associated with the “end of history,” involving a self-referential morality and leading us towards the geopolitical equivalent of a “gated community.” An alternative imaginary is shaped by hope and mercy; it accepts the 2024 Pact for the Future as embodying, in embryo, a common medium-term plan for humanity; it fosters a disposition more trusting of others, more geared to the long-term, and more attuned to common benefits that are not easily measured.

To escape from the “self-referential imaginary,” we should acknowledge the complexity of post-Cold War history. Dominic Lieven, arguing for a nuanced approach to territorial issues in Ukraine, distinguishes between historical justice and international law.¹⁴

There is more to Lieven’s intuition than mere pragmatism. In Ireland, Britain’s Boundary Commission of 1925 partitioned the island in an artificial way (colonial-style). Within the CSCE it was our task as the Irish delegation to make sure that the Helsinki principles did not implicitly ratify or make permanent the 1925 partition, which in our view cut across communities and historical economic connections in an unjust manner. We sought to hold in balance such principles as territorial integrity, non-intervention, self-determination, the change of frontiers by peaceful means, the obligation to co-operate in all fields, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. In 1991, we were very much aware that drawing new lines on maps needs to be accompanied by historically sensitive policies across a range of issues. To recognise each part of the Soviet and Yugoslav federations as an independent state was to interpret the CSCE principle of the territorial integrity of states in a particular way in the light of other principles. There were potential sources of conflict and obvious areas of interdependence among the new states. A number of evident challenges ought to have been effectively addressed. It was assumed, for example, that there would be no strategic conflicts among the new states and that Russia and Ukraine, with others, would preserve a union or commonwealth of some kind, including a shared economic space.¹⁵

In the 1990s, the United States and its allies sought to blur the distinction between NATO and regional arrangements under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter. The vogue term was “interlocking institutions”. NATO, as a “security provider”, was argued to be analogous to the UN. But a functioning CSCE or OSCE is not the same as a security order based on deterrence. What works in practice is a balance between different paradigms of security.

Principle IX of the Helsinki Final Act obliges participating States to develop their cooperation “in all fields … to improve the wellbeing of peoples,” taking into account “the interest of all in the narrowing of differences in the levels of economic development.” The European Union, including the Commission, has been reluctant to accept Principle IX as a basis for dialogue in the regional context. As the special coordinator for effectiveness and efficiency in the Helsinki plus 40 process from 2013 to 2015, I found that at least some friends in Brussels favoured a “hub-and-spokes” model of cooperation prioritising bilateral relationships at the expense of the OSCE’s “second dimension.” To some extent this was a natural consequence of the accession negotiations which of course were carried out country-by-country; in practice, the outcome was to undermine the original significance of the economic and environmental dimension of the OSCE. Some EU member States were in favour of winding down the second dimension as a matter of policy, on the grounds that the OSCE lacks “comparative advantage” as a forum for economic dialogue. In the sphere of human rights, western states have pursued a narrow agenda, often focussing on gender issues which have no clear foothold in CSCE

14 “A window exists to end the bloodshed in Ukraine,” letter to the Financial Times, 30 April 2025.

15 The American historian Mary Elise Sarotte emphasises the referendum that asserted Ukrainian sovereignty in December 1991 (“Ukraine’s bitter bargain,” Financial Times 3 May/4 May 2025). Sarotte is less focused on the circumstances and understandings that were to shape the exercise of sovereignty; she seems to me somewhat dismissive, apparently because we are dealing with “smaller entities,” of the bloodshed and confused jurisprudence that arose in Yugoslavia in broadly analogous circumstances.

commitments.

Furthermore, within the European Union, an unqualified attachment to our preferred narrative of events since 1991 is having a ricochet effect on our own societies. The more we invest resources in war, the more the quality of our deliberation deteriorates in the interests of “sending a clear message” to others. But how the message will be received is uncertain, all the more so in a long time-scale and across a wide geography.¹⁶

In my view, we should acknowledge that no single narrative of the post-Cold War period is complete and definitive and that we have gradually lost perspective. The rhetoric that equates “Europe” and “European Union” should give way to a practical proposition: the continuing success of the European Union, to the benefit of Russia, Turkey, the UK, and other neighbours, is an essential condition for a Europe at peace and for the progress of global diplomacy.

The anatomy of reconciliation

In politics, there are pathologies, and there are therapies. An important therapy is to establish rational criteria for a strategy of reconciliation. Sometimes the only way to put our past behind us is to move forward on a new path. “A new beginning for everyone” was cited as the principle of reconciliation in South Africa.

A comparative examination of peacebuilding processes (the Helsinki process, South Africa, Northern Ireland, Colombia) suggests that a new beginning is closely connected to an inclusive social vision. Moreover, the “macro” illuminates the “micro”. When we build a “security community,” a zone of peace and active cooperation across a whole region, individual conflicts can more easily be resolved. Our awareness of planetary issues translates into an affirmation of humanity and can give us our “spiritual orientation” as we pursue reconciliation.

Any political situation must be read in terms of the seeds of future development that are already present. To quote Seamus Heaney again:

“What looks the strongest has outlived its term:

the future lies with what’s affirmed from under.”¹⁷

The peace process in Northern Ireland involved seeing the poetic truth of the situation¹⁸ and re-framing the problem. Faced with a binary question, whether Northern Ireland should be Irish or British, we developed a new conceptual approach, no longer a zero-sum game, that focussed on cross-community cooperation in Northern Ireland, an all-Ireland dimension, and a re-imagining of relationships between Ireland and Britain. In today’s Northern Ireland, a citizen can identify as Irish or British or both. What will happen post-ceasefire in Ukraine will inevitably seem very “imperfect” from many people’s point of view. But a political settlement that is “imperfect”, and focusses on all relevant relationships as much as on territory, can become an important form of witness and a source of hope.¹⁹

The more we understand political pathologies and political therapies and work towards reconciliation, the more we will find ourselves drawn towards the more generous imaginary evoked above.

16 Yuval Noah Harari, “Trump’s vision of a world of rival fortresses,” Financial Times, 19 April/20 April 2025

17 From Heaney’s collection The Haw Lantern

18 Heaney’s Nobel Lecture, cited above.

19 See my article “Diplomacy Beyond Revenge,” The Tablet, London, 27th March 2025

George Kennan stated,²⁰ “It is the ingrained habits and assumptions of men, and above all of men in government, which alone can guarantee any enduring state of peaceful relations among nations.”

Diplomatic methodology

An important lesson from peace-making in Northern Ireland is that “talks about talks” can define guiding principles, a structured agenda, a time-line, conditions that parties must accept on entering negotiations, decision-making procedures (“nothing is agreed until everything is agreed”) and other parameters for negotiations. The points of agreement emerging from talks about talks can help shape a good outcome. A commitment to make a multilateral organisation such as the OSCE more fit-for-purpose and to extend its mandate to cover new topics is not enough; talks about talks should frame the orientation and methodology for a new phase of diplomacy.

A cycle of compartmentalised consultations lacking in political energy is not a likely pathway to a “civilisational” transformation. Nor is an “independent institution” tasked with holding governments to account. In his last letter to Corriere Della Sera,²¹ Pope Francis wanted a style of diplomacy that acknowledges “complexity”. From the former CSCE, we can borrow several ideas: a wide agenda broken down into “baskets”; the gradual sifting of proposals to elicit priorities; and balancing progress in each basket against progress in the others. Progress in any one area should have a ripple effect within a comprehensive dialogue.

“Civilizational diplomacy” needs to operate to a slow rhythm. The CSCE was conceived as a process; conferences were extended over years, not months, and included breaks for reflection and consultation. A complex multilateral negotiation needs the support of disinterested officials who serve the process itself. The new framework of engagement should arguably make specific provision for a dialogue with churches, faith communities, and philosophical or “conviction-based” organisations. Pope Francis’s letter to Corriere Della Sera proposed a multi-stakeholder approach inclusive of our deepest cultural sources: religions can “draw on the spirituality of peoples to reignite the desire for fraternity and justice and the hope of peace.”²²

‘The new phase of diplomacy’ should seek outcomes at two levels, as in the former CSCE:

1. the gradual definition of new criteria or points of agreement (a “matrix of principles”) in the sphere of international relations
2. the progressive adoption of confidence-building measures (or “measures having demonstration value”).

20 The Nuclear Delusion. 1982

21 https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/25_marzo_18/papa-francesco-lettera-corriere-esclusiva-4917a7c9-d4ce-448f-981d-36e9b79dexlk.shtml

22 This approach is already reflected in relevant OSCE Ministerial Council decisions, e.g. Porto (2002), Basel (2014), and Kyiv (2013). The Kyiv decision called on OSCE participating States, *inter alia*, to “promote and facilitate open and transparent interfaith and interreligious dialogue and partnerships.” The role of faith communities in fostering social cohesion complements the OSCE’s ongoing efforts to combat anti-Semitism, intolerance against Muslims, Christians, and members of other religions. Cf. Article 17, Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union.

A future agenda based on “the letter, the model, and the spirit of Helsinki”

In the current issue of Foreign Affairs, Alexander Gabuev examines future European scenarios in a spirit of detached realism.²³ Considering the European Union’s long-term economic interests, the shared East-West interest in arms control and non-interference in internal affairs, and the impact of confrontation on domestic politics in western societies,²⁴ Gabuev argues for a medium-term strategy of re-engagement with Moscow. The present article presents a more urgent version of a similar agenda. The main reason for urgency is the relevance of what happens in the OSCE region to the prospects for peace and development in other geographies.

Concretely, what would an all-European agenda look like? During the “Helsinki plus 40” review process many governments were open to the idea of a summit at the level of Heads of State and Government.²⁵ Taking the CSCE as an approximate model, exploratory talks might work towards a summit which would in turn launch a future process covering, respectively, the principles of political legitimacy, up to six broad areas for enlarging cooperation (“baskets”), and operational questions including the development of interregional partnerships in a global perspective.

Under the first heading, participating states would review the Helsinki principles (“renew their marriage vows”), while addressing other issues on which there is as yet no clear, shared vision. How, for example, do we relate “sovereign equality” to “pooling sovereignty” within the European Union?

The six baskets would build on the long CSCE/OSCE tradition.

In the military/political basket, participating states would revive an ambitious arms control agenda. Should we, in addition, set limits to espionage and the deployment of cyber capabilities? Perhaps we should reactivate dialogue around the Helsinki vision of comprehensive security.²⁶

In the economic and environmental basket, the regional implications of the UN Pact for the Future²⁷ would be a central topic.

This second basket could become the space in which the European Union develops a more adaptive policy in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and vis-à-vis the UK and Turkey. Over the coming years, the customs union, the single market, the free movement of workers, the euro, agricultural policy, budgetary supports, and other aspects of shared sovereignty will be applied gradually and in a differentiated way in different countries across Europe. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015 allowed Ukraine to join the EU while retaining economic links to Russia. President Putin even wrote articles in 2012 and 2013 floating the idea that the Eurasian Economic Union should gradually adopt EU standards.²⁸

²³ Alexander Gabuev, “The Russia That Putin Made/Moscow, the West, and Coexistence without Illusion,” *Foreign Affairs*, New York, May-June 2025

²⁴ And of course in the Russian Federation as well.

²⁵ The last OSCE Summit was in Astana in 2010.

²⁶ In 2024, 53 African states supported China’s Global Security Initiative (GSI) which upholds the principle of “indivisible security” and includes among its specific commitments, “taking the security concerns of all countries seriously.”

²⁷ At the time of the CSCE, the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the work of the second basket were seen as complementary

²⁸ It is reported in the Italian press that President Putin reverted to the relevance of the Minsk agreements in an interview recorded for transmission on 7th May 2025

Another possible focus for the second basket is food sovereignty/food security. Globally, the continuing vacuum of values and policies at this “macro” level prejudices peace efforts in many situations of conflict. Can we establish a metric measuring expenditure on armaments against other expenditures, including budgets for multilateral diplomacy? Can we launch a dialogue, supported by an academic network, on whether a dichotomy between profit-based activities and non-profit activities does full justice to reality?²⁹

In the third basket, the sphere of human rights and humanitarian cooperation, we can turn the global human rights agenda into a powerful “weapon of peace,” a roadmap in the face of war, pandemic, climate change, disinformation, and widening inequality.³⁰

Three emerging challenges may deserve baskets of their own:

- the question of migration, or of demography and migration treated as aspects of a single subject
- the implications of AI for public administration, education, the future of work, and in the military sphere
- the potential use of quantum technology to break current encryption models (a topic of cross-dimensional relevance)

The final strand of our multi-layered process would address operational questions, including interregional cooperation and relations with counterpart organisations and processes. As Henry Kissinger stated so clearly, “The contemporary quest for world order will require a coherent strategy to establish a concept of order within the various regions, and to relate these regional orders to one another.”³¹

The defining goals of a new all-European process can be summed up in three points:

- recognition of the European Union as the anchor of a wider European zone of peace and economic cooperation
- avoiding “zero-sum games” in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and other parts of the region
- a renewed commitment, based on the Helsinki principles, to enshrine cooperative economic relationships as a core value in international relations and in this way bring the European and global agendas together.

29 The imposition on the post-Soviet space and Eastern Europe of reductions in state spending, privatisation, foreign investment bypassing local legal systems, and deregulation (the “Washington consensus”) complicated the political transitions of the 1990s

30 See, for example:

https://www.ted.com/talks/michael_o_flaherty_how_can_we_place_human_rights_at_the_heart_of_our_actions?subtitle=en

31 Henry Kissinger, *World Order/Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 2014, Allen Lane, p. 371

Understanding how change happens

The confidence that somehow, somewhere, the seed sown by upright action will come to a ripening is central to the second of the two “imaginaries” I describe above. By convening a new values-led European process genuinely open to a socio-economic transition, our political leaders can help us climb, as it were, to a pass in the mountains from which a better future as yet unseen can become visible for the first time. We must find the courage to believe, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed during the darkest days of the 20th century, that “something new can be born that is not discernible in the alternatives of the present.”³²



³² See the early section of Bonhoeffer’s letter under the heading: ‘Without Ground under One’s Feet’ in D. Bonhoeffer (2017 [1942]), ‘After Ten Years,’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8, pp. 37–52. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.



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