SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR

The OSCE at 50: Staying Relevant in a Fragmenting World

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As the OSCE marks its 50th anniversary, it does so in a world profoundly different from the one in which it was conceived. What we face today is not simply another period of turbulence, but a transformation in the very foundations of the international order on which this Organization was built.

The entire multilateral system is under strain. Institutions that once embodied the promise of collective security and cooperation are struggling to perform even their most basic functions.

Power politics has returned with force. The logic of competition increasingly replaces the logic of cooperation. International norms that once seemed settled, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, human rights, are openly contested. The gap between the ideals of the Helsinki Final Act and the political reality is too wide to ignore or gloss over. Today, the principles of the HFA are more invoked than they are applied.

In this emerging order, bounded systems — alliances, blocs, and coalitions of the like-minded — are proving more resilient. They are sustained by shared values, binding legal frameworks, and a degree of internal trust.

The OSCE, by design, is not one of these bounded orders. It was built on inclusivity and consensus across ideological divides — an extraordinary strength when dialogue is possible, but a crippling limitation when trust collapses. And today, trust is in short supply — on all sides.

Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine has not only shattered peace in Europe; it has torn through the political fabric that sustained this Organization. The OSCE's basic premise — that participating States share at least a minimum commitment to the principles of Helsinki — no longer holds.

The EU and like-minded partners have taken clear, principled positions in defence of Ukraine and international law. Russia, in turn, stands among the most heavily sanctioned regimes in modern history. The consequences for this Organization are profound: our space for dialogue has narrowed to the thinnest of margins.

Yet even in this constrained environment, the OSCE has continued to deliver objective, professional reporting. Recent Moscow Mechanism missions have documented in detail the grave violations of international humanitarian and human rights law resulting from Russia's aggression, providing an authoritative factual basis for international accountability efforts. Likewise, ODIHR's ongoing monitoring of the human rights situation in Ukraine — including through its dedicated Ukraine Monitoring Initiative — has become an indispensable source of credible information, supporting justice mechanisms, national reforms, and the needs of victims.

These efforts demonstrate a simple truth: even when consensus is blocked, OSCE commitments and OSCE instruments remain relevant.

Even when the guns fall silent, and that day will come, rebuilding trust and confidence will take years, perhaps decades.

For the OSCE, this crisis strikes at its very core. The Organization's commitments are political, not legally binding. Its tools rely on voluntary cooperation and consensus. When trust disappears, those tools lose much of their force.

The consensus rule, once a safeguard of inclusivity, has too often become a weapon of obstruction. Core functions, from budget adoption to senior appointments, are routinely blocked or delayed.

But the OSCE survives today not because the political climate favours it, but because of the commitment of those who still believe in its purpose — and who continue to fund and support the work that delivers.

The United States and others have urged the OSCE to evolve — to move beyond being a "talk shop." That challenge is fair. Dialogue without delivery risks irrelevance.

But in the current geopolitical climate, meaningful structural reform is not feasible. The task, therefore, is to work smarter with what we have — to sharpen focus, seek efficiencies, and identify niches where the OSCE's added value can still attract political and financial support.

For now, participating States' voluntary funding and political energy concentrate on Ukraine, on the work of the OSCE autonomous institutions, and on field operations. These are areas where the OSCE continues to deliver, quietly but credibly.

We must be realistic. In this environment, sweeping reform or ambitious new mandates are unlikely. The OSCE's path forward will be one of pragmatic resilience — muddling through, staying lean, and focusing on what continues to work. That means protecting what delivers real, visible value:

- Field operations, providing eyes and ears on the ground.
- OSCE autonomous institutions — election observation, support for democratic institutions, media freedom, and rights of persons belonging to national minorities.
    - Robust human-rights monitoring and documentation, including ODIHR's work on Ukraine and its thematic monitoring across the region.
    - Expert reporting mechanisms, including the Moscow Mechanism, which has demonstrated its relevance in exposing violations and supporting accountability.
- Conflict prevention and early warning, even when the space for diplomacy is narrow.

These are the OSCE's most trusted instruments — practical, credible, and people-centered. They allow this Organization to continue to matter, even as the political environment grows harsher.

The human dimension is the foundation of stable societies. In an era of shrinking civic space, this commitment is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

Our institutions — ODIHR, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, and the High Commissioner on National Minorities — retain credibility because they work with and for people. They embody the principle that security is not merely the absence of conflict, but the presence of rights.

Accountability must remain central. The OSCE's documentation — from the Moscow Mechanism to ODIHR's monitoring — already supports international accountability efforts, and this focus must be strengthened. It signals that while political dialogue may falter, the OSCE's normative foundations endure.

And in this environment of inter-state distrust, civil society becomes an indispensable partner. When governments cannot speak to one another, citizens often can. The OSCE's engagement with human rights defenders, journalists, youth, and local communities is not peripheral — it is our lifeline.

The OSCE's thematic expertise remains one of its comparative advantages. From preventing and combating trafficking in human beings, to addressing the environmental consequences of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the organization's technical and field-based work delivers concrete value and contributes to resilience and recovery.

This work speaks to the OSCE's unique identity: a security organization that understands security in all its dimensions.

The OSCE was born from the belief that security can be built through dialogue. That belief is being tested as never before. The multilateral landscape around us is fragmenting.

But for as long as we can preserve even a minimal space for communication — as long as we uphold the principles of Helsinki in word and deed — the OSCE will continue to serve a purpose: not as a grand architect of order, but as a guardian of possibility.

That may not be the vision of 1975. But in 2025, that is what endurance looks like.

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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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