

The OSCE back to square one? Rescuing the organization from the illusion of a CSCE-revival

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DOI: 1058866/EMIM3164

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

The 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2025 has reignited debate on the future of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an institution now facing what many call a terminal existential crisis. Russia's invasion of Ukraine, institutional paralysis, and waning political engagement have raised informal suggestions to revert the OSCE back to its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). This article critically assesses the proposal for a 'return' to a CSCE-style format and argues that such regression would not resolve the OSCE's challenges but accelerate its decline.

Drawing on interviews with diplomats, policymakers, and experts, as well as analysis of institutional developments and scholarly literature, this contribution shows how dismantling the OSCE's institutional framework would erode its normative acquis, field operations, and unique mechanisms for crisis management and prevention. Instead, we suggest that the path forward lies in preserving the OSCE's core institutional strengths while embracing a more pronounced CSCE character that revitalizes dialogue without sacrificing hard-won capacities. The paper concludes that the OSCE remains indispensable for European security, particularly in preparing for the post-war order in Ukraine, and that its survival should be considered a prerequisite for rebuilding trust and cooperation in Europe.

Key words: CSCE - Helsinki Final Act - Human security - OSCE - Ukraine

Introduction

Fifty years ago, on August 1, 1975, following two years of negotiation known as the Helsinki Process, 35 states – including those from the opposing sides of the Iron Curtain – committed themselves to the key principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The commemoration of this landmark document in 2025 in the Finnish capital offered an opportunity to reaffirm the legacy of the Helsinki principles, despite the persistence of serious differences in interpretation, and the need to revive the ‘Helsinki spirit’.¹ It also allowed the 57 participating States of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to return to the roots of the Vienna-based organization and to confirm their commitment to this forum – albeit, for a few of them, not without harsh criticism.² However, the long awaited – and dreaded – Helsinki +50 anniversary could not dispel the “terminal existential crisis” in which the OSCE has slid.³ While political deadlock and institutional gridlock are not new to the OSCE,⁴ today’s situation goes far beyond technical dysfunction. It reflects a deeper erosion of the organization’s legitimacy, political relevance and visibility in international diplomacy. The organization is not just stuck to the status quo but is also in decline⁵ – a process accelerated by the broader crisis of multilateralism.

Attempts to ‘reinvigorate’ the organization have been flourishing these past few years, from the 2009 Corfu Process to the ongoing Structured Dialogue, through the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project installed in 2014 by the Swiss Chairpersonship, and former Secretary General Thomas Greminger’s 2018 ‘Fit for Purpose’ agenda. However, the OSCE’s fight for survival has triggered a paradox. In light of the current crisis, the idea has emerged to completely ‘return’ the OSCE to its earlier format, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

The CSCE’s attraction has always been perceptible. In 2015, Christian Nünlist suggested to “revisit the traditional role of the CSCE during the Cold War” and coined this approach as an “attractive way forward”⁶; according to the Head of the think tank team ‘Swiss and Euro-Atlantic Security’ at the Center for Security Studies (CSS), “there is still need for such an ‘old OSCE’”; “now that the weather has turned worse again, maybe the OSCE needs to change again – back to the ‘Cold War OSCE’”⁷. To date, no explicit calls to revive the pre-1995 format have been publicly voiced by participating States of the organization, but the idea has circulated tacitly in both expert and policy cycles. Underlying the notion is the belief that the OSCE and its institutions are no longer ‘fit for purpose’ under current geopolitical conditions. While the transformation of the CSCE into the OSCE in the 1990s was a “symbol of institutionalizing shared hopes,” the period since 1995 has largely been marked by a “shattering of trust”

1 M. Perrin de Brichambaut and L. Simonet, ‘The Helsinki +50 commemoration (30 July-1 August 2025): Main takeovers and the way forward’, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, 2025, <https://www.oii.ac.at/publikation/the-helsinki-50-commemoration-30-july-1-august-2025-main-takeovers-and-the-way-forward/>.

2 See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s article ‘The Helsinki Act’s 50th anniversary: Expectations, reality, and future,’ *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2039053.

3 A. Shekhovtsov, ‘The Helsinki Final Act turns 50: the rise — and fall — of the OSCE’, *EU Observer*, 2025, <https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/ar2a0997e7>.

4 See L. Simonet, ‘The OSCE in *Zeitenwende*: How to keep the organization on the radar screen?’, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, Trend Report 4, 2024, <https://www.oii.ac.at/publikation/the-osce-in-zeitenwende-how-to-keep-the-organization-on-the-radar-screen/>.

5 L. Schuette and H. Dijkstra, ‘When an International organization Fails to Legitimate: The Decline of the OSCE’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4, 2023.

6 C. Nünlist, ‘Helsinki+40 in the Historical Context’, in *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, vol. 25 issue 2, June 2014, pp. 198-209, here at p. 209.

7 *Ibid.*

within the organization.⁸ There seems to be no margin for gradual change. As a former high-level OSCE official highlighted to us, the organization has already begun to resemble its predecessor, in both form and function - reduced meetings, symbolic dialogue, and minimal operational activity.⁹ The current debate over a return to a CSCE-style format is therefore the culmination of an idea that has slowly matured over the past decades, catalysed by the war in Ukraine. What is floating around as a 'solution' to the OSCE's profound institutional paralysis and the geopolitical upheaval caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, is to revert the organization to its Cold War-era role as a forum primarily for political dialogue.¹⁰

This article demonstrates that the proposed regression to a CSCE-style arrangement is not a solution but a symptom of decline. Far from saving the OSCE, dismantling its institutional framework would disregard its historical incomparability to its predecessor, signal a capitulation to the demands of an authoritarian and expansionist Russia, accelerate its marginalization, and remove the mechanisms necessary for long-term conflict prevention and crisis management. While the idea of a minimalistic dialogue forum may sound pragmatic in a time of political gridlock, it risks trading away the OSCE's unique institutional strengths, its field operations, and its norm-based approach, for short-term expediency. In our opinion, the path forward should not entail a complete return to the older model, but rather incorporate a "more pronounced CSCE character"¹¹ within the OSCE framework, positioning it as an effective instrument.

This work draws on qualitative material collected through semi-structured interviews with experts and government officials from OSCE participating States. Interviewees include permanent representatives and their deputies, policy staff in foreign ministries, and academic observers; in addition, one former Secretary General of the OSCE provided reflections based on his tenure. These insights are supplemented by qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, official OSCE documents, and policy reports.

This contribution is divided into 5 main parts. First, it assesses how the OSCE's human dimension and, in particular, the contested role of the OSCE's autonomous institutions, became core to the debate over a return to a CSCE-style format. Second, it shows that, beyond 'saviours' and detractors of the human dimension, a CSCE 2.0 option could gain support from other security actors. Third, we argue that not only the OSCE's institutions, but also its other 'crown jewels' - the field operations and the normative acquis-, would come under existential threat through a restoration of pre-1995 conditions. Fourth, we demonstrate, based on historical comparisons and a candid assessment of the OSCE's identity, why bringing back the CSCE-model and 'killing the OSCE to better save it' is a dead end and a dangerous idea. Instead, we argue for a compromise: a standing OSCE with a more pronounced CSCE character.

8 Interview, senior official from a Western/NATO member OSCE pS, Vienna, 17 July 2025.

9 Interview, former high-level OSCE Secretariat official, Vienna, 8 July 2025.

10 A. Zagorski, 'The CSCE: Lessons from the Past', *OSCE Insights* 2022, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, pp. 65-74, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783748933625.pdf>.

11 Interview, former permanent representative of an EU country to the OSCE, Vienna, 5 August 2025.

1. The human dimension: the bone of contention

The growing focus on the third dimension of the OSCE comprehensive security over the last decade has led to a growing rift between two antagonistic positions.

On the one hand, a group of Western participating States have stood on an uncompromising position regarding respect for human rights, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the rule of law, backed by a prominent OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in a situation of quasi-independence; this vision, very perceptible under the Obama administration with the ambassadorship of Daniel Baer, U.S. Permanent Representative to the OSCE from 2013 to 2017, culminated in the Swedish Chairpersonship of the organization in 2021.

On the other hand, an authoritarian and expansionist Russia has persistently sought to marginalize or block the OSCE's human dimension mechanisms such as the ODIHR and the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RfOM), viewing them as instruments of Western influence rather than neutral tools for democratic oversight. Moscow often argues that these institutions impede the security dialogue within the organization and divert attention from central issues affecting the entirety of European cooperation.¹² Russia has long criticized the OSCE's geographic emphasis 'East of Vienna' and its active engagement in election monitoring and the human dimension, accusing it of lacking genuine dialogue on European security and of pursuing an agenda not aligned with host governments.¹³

Faced with the current impasse, these two antagonistic camps might paradoxically converge on the idea to dismantle the OSCE to better preserve its core values – or what they consider to be such.

Some OSCE participating States, particularly in Nordic Europe, might show openness to the suggestion made by Thomas Graham, distinguished fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. For this American expert, 'privatizing/decoupling' essential OSCE institutions – notably the ODIHR – by having them funded by individual states would allow for circumventing the gridlock of consensus-based budgeting.¹⁴ Since the assessment is made that these institutions, in their current form, cannot endure, and that such a drastic reform is essential to ensure their survival, they would simply be turned into 'gigantic extrabudgetary - ExB - projects'.¹⁵ The corollary of such an approach is easy to discern: deprived from its most visible institutional tools, the OSCE would be left with its two decision-making bodies: the Permanent Council and the Forum for Security Co-operation, currently in a situation of quasi-paralysis and relegated as mere fora for (non) discussion.

On the opposite side, voices call to simply dismantle the autonomous institutions and reduce the OSCE to a minimal, consensus-based platform focused solely on dialogue around hard security. Core to Christian Nünlist's reference to the "old Cold War OSCE" is the criticism of an OSCE which pretends to be a "community of values" – which, according to the Swiss expert, the organization was never meant to be – and turned to "a Western agency exporting Western values to Eurasia", as well as the nostalgia for a CSCE where "Western and Eastern concepts of security were respected".¹⁶ Further

12 D. Suslov, *OSCE on Artificial Life Support or a Return to the CSCE?*, Valдай Discussion Club, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/osce-on-artificial-life-support-or-a-return-to-the-csce/>.

13 M. Dembinski and H.-J. Spanger, 'Pluralistic Peace: New Perspectives for the OSCE?', *OSCE Insights* 2021, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, pp. 173–183, <https://www.inlibra.com/en/document/view/detail/uuid/e24ef66d-718b-38bd-aa51-974a646b827a>.

14 T. Graham, 'From the Ukraine Conflict to a Secure Europe', *Center for Preventive Action Report*, Council on Foreign Relations, 2024, https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/From%20the%20Ukraine%20Conflict%20to%20a%20Secure%20Europe.pdf.

15 Interview, senior official from a Western/NATO member OSCE pS, Vienna, 17 July 2025.

16 C. Nünlist, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

downgrading and stripping 'Western-oriented' OSCE institutions of their mandates plays directly into the hands of Russia. In 2023, Dmitry Suslov, Deputy Director of the Centre for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, argued in favour of a conference-based reform with only a minimal structure retained: the Council of Foreign Ministers, serving as a channel of communication between Russia and the West.¹⁷ More recently, the article circulated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on August 1, 2025, ahead of the commemorative H+50 event in Helsinki, gave a glimpse of Russia's vision of a "flexible and resilient architecture of equal and indivisible security and cooperation in Eurasia."¹⁸

There is worse. Russian calls to dismantle the ODIHR or drastically tie its hands now find an unexpected – or actually very much expected and feared by the OSCE community since Donald Trump's return to power – echo on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. For the first time, at the Permanent Council on September 18, 2025, in its response to the address of incoming Swiss Chairperson-in-Office Ignazio Cassis, the U.S. representative to the OSCE expressed barely veiled threats against ODIHR and "its inflammatory, biased, and inaccurate report about the 2020 U.S. elections".¹⁹ So far, criticizing the ODIHR was Russia's 'privilege'; this is no longer the case.

2. The 'opportunists': the U.S. and the civil society

The scenario of a shift back to the CSCE might quickly win other favours.

Highly flexible framework and lean institutional structure – what Dov Lynch, former Senior Adviser to the OSCE Secretary General, once called "travelling conference"²⁰ – are more and more attractive features for decision-makers in a hurry and eager to cut unnecessary budget lines. A good example is the European Political Community (EPC), an intergovernmental forum for political and strategic discussions about the future of Europe established in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The EPC mirrors the CSCE's format and even occupies a similar discursive space. Diplomats have described it as an "OSCE without Russia",²¹ a kind of successor to the OSCE²² or even its "potential competitor".²³ Formats such as the EPC might become appealing for a sceptical, if not openly hostile, U.S. administration.

17 D. Suslov, *op. cit.*

18 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2025). Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's article 'The Helsinki Act's 50th anniversary: Expectations, reality, and future,' *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 2025, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/2039053.

19 See PC.DEL/943/25, 18 September 2025.

20 D. Lynch, 'The State of the OSCE', *eurussia centre*, issue 12, 2009, p. 7, https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/109750/Review_XII.pdf.

21 A. Brzozowski, 'European Political Community' takes shape in face of Russia's war', *Euractiv*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/armenia/news/european-political-community-takes-shape-in-face-of-russias-war/>.

22 A. Koziół and L. Maślanka, 'European Political Community Meets for the First Time', *The Polish Institute of International Affairs*, Spotlight No 128, 7 October 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/european-political-community-meets-for-the-first-time>.

23 P. Jones, 'What Shall We Do With the OSCE?', *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-shall-we-do-osce>.

The United States government has generally taken a rather cautious approach to the OSCE, “between low to non-existent interest in CSCE/OSCE affairs”, P. Terrence Hopmann assesses.²⁴ During the post-Cold War period, the organization has always played a secondary role in U.S. policy.²⁵ American leaders have generally refrained from supporting measures to strengthen it. In particular, they constantly objected to efforts to place the OSCE on a firmer legal footing, refusing to grant the organization the status of an entity possessing international legal personality, and the diplomatic immunities and privileges for its staff that go with this.²⁶ Superficially, this was justified by stating that the OSCE must remain flexible and dynamic. The real reason, however, was to prevent the OSCE from developing into a competitor for NATO in the early 1990s and keep the Vienna-based organization in what may best be termed a supporting role.²⁷

As William Hill summarizes, the OSCE “has never been particularly popular, well known, or well understood by US political leaders and the American voting public.”²⁸ Although Donald Trump paid no particular attention to the OSCE during his first mandate, his aversion for multilateralism leaves a sword of Damocles hanging over the organization. “In their unspoken thoughts, American officials see the ideal OSCE of the twenty-first century as precisely the same as they see the OSCE of today: a low profile, low-cost, workaday way of organizing intergovernmental co-operation in Europe.”²⁹ The U.S. administration might be prompt to jump on the first opportunity to reduce it ab initio.

Another growing actor within the OSCE community might also find its way in a conference-style institution: the civil society. Activists and human rights defenders remember that, beyond the political and diplomatic activity, the Helsinki process created a sphere of informal contacts between societies that had not existed during the mutual isolation and lack of communication of the 1950s and 60s. Fifty years after, the civil society, the “lifeblood of democracy,”³⁰ turns nostalgic and grateful eyes to “the courage of men and women” whose fight opened a new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe.³¹ It also expresses frustration with regard to the current OSCE stalemate. At the commemorative conference in Helsinki on July 31, 2025, Ukrainian activist Oleksandra Matviichuk, Head of the Center for Civil Liberties, Nobel Peace Prize Candidate, assessed that geopolitical interests at the OSCE Permanent Council often took precedence over the defense of human rights: “we have to change this approach”, she advised.³² NGOs and advocacy groups might feel more at ease in the framework of a CSCE 2.0 that could reconnect them, even remotely, with the ‘golden age’ of civic dissidence in the 1970s and 1980s.

24 P. Terrence Hopmann, ‘The United States and the CSCE/OSCE’, *Helsinki Monitor*, 2000, no. 2, pp. 20-36, here p. 22.

25 J. Dean, ‘The USA and the OSCE: Still a Morganatic Union’, *OSCE Yearbook* 1997, p. 41, <https://www.ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/97/Dean.pdf>.

26 L. Simonet and H. G. Lüber, ‘The OSCE and Its Legal Status: Revisiting the Myth of Sisyphus’, *OSCE Yearbook* 2016, pp. 277-314, partic. pp. 301-303, https://www.ifsh.de/file/publication/OSCE_Yearbook_en/2016/SimonetLüber-en.pdf.

27 L. Simonet, ‘The OSCE and NATO: Side by Side in a Turbulent World’, *OSCE Yearbook* 2017, pp. 279-313. https://ifsh.de/file/publication/OSCE_Yearbook_en/2017/Simonet-en.pdf

28 W. H. Hill, ‘The OSCE Approaching Fifty: Does the Organization Have a Future?’, *OSCE Insights* 2022, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, 14, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/de/document/view/pdf/uuid/53fb8527-632f-35be-a823-265941743deb?page=1>.

29 J. Dean, ‘The USA and the OSCE: Still a Morganatic Union’, *OSCE Yearbook* 1997, p. 40, <https://www.ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/97/Dean.pdf>.

30 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Finland E. Valtonen, Opening Remarks at the Helsinki+50 Conference, 2025, <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/opening-remarks-by-minister-elina-valtonen-at-the-helsinki-50-conference>.

31 Charter of Paris for a New Europe, preamble, 1990, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf>.

32 See M. Perrin de Brichambaut and L. Simonet, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

3. A crown without jewels

The OSCE is an organization equipped with permanent institutions, field operations and other operational capabilities to match new requirements for security in the post-Cold War world. With the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna, the quiet diplomacy of the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), or the multiple activities of the ODIHR and of the RFoM, the OSCE has built a targeted expertise to assist participating States and their societies in implementing their commitment to a comprehensive concept of security. Beyond ‘privatizing’ or simply dismantling the three autonomous institutions, the return to a conference format would affect the two other OSCE’s main assets: its field operations (FO) and its normative acquis.

Labelled the “crown jewels” of the OSCE³³, field missions represent one of the OSCE’s main comparative advantages and serve as critical bridges between local grassroots actors and international norms. They have acted as important vehicles to assist states in capacity-building for the rule of law as well as in conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. Through its field presence, the OSCE has built unique experience in supporting the consolidation of societies undergoing political and economic transition.

Russia and its allies have frequently voiced their dissatisfaction with the FO, specifically because of their “geographical asymmetry,” being based mainly in the former Soviet area and the Western Balkans, and their “over-emphasis [...] in the human dimension.”³⁴ For Moscow, OSCE election monitoring missions and field missions monitoring the implementation of respect for human rights and other Helsinki principles always contradicted the OSCE principles of non-intervention in domestic affairs and state sovereignty.³⁵ In the last few years, the Russian Federation has only reluctantly agreed to the prolongation of the mandate of the remaining FO, for instance when Russia imposed a six-month only prolongation of the mandate of the OSCE mission to Moldova instead of the regular 12-month extension, which places a burden on the mission and its ability to conduct its work efficiently. Needless to say, Russia and most of its ‘East of Warsaw’ allies would immediately endorse the FO’s disappearance or radical downsizing.

A return to the CSCE model would significantly jeopardize the FO. Although the OSCE’s first field missions were launched in the early 1990s in the Balkans, specifically in Kosovo, Sandjak, and Vojvodina, in response to renewed conflict and the changing European security landscape following the fall of the Soviet Union, these early missions in the former Yugoslavia were precursors to the broader transformation of the CSCE into the OSCE in 1995, formalizing its role as a field organization. Getting rid of the institutional structure enshrined in the transition from the CSCE to the OSCE would imply their probable end, hence weakening the OSCE’s connection to civil society actors in peripheral regions. The model of the OSCE’s “engagement without presence” in Georgia, after the closure of its mission in 2009, due to Russia’s refusal to renew the mission’s mandate following the August 2008 Russian–Georgian war,³⁶ has shown strong limitations and would be of little help.

33 S. Liechtenstein, ‘What is the future of OSCE field operations,’ *Security and Human Rights*, 2013, <https://www.shrmonitor.org/future-osce-field-operations/>

34 P. Dunay, ‘The OSCE in Unabated Decline,’ *Elcano Royal Institute Analysis*, Real Instituto Elcano, 2007, <https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/en/analyses/the-osce-in-unabated-decline-ari/>.

35 C. Nünlist, *op. cit.*, p.205.

36 See N. Kemoklidze N., ‘In the Absence of Field Missions: The OSCE’s Engagement with Georgia’s Conflicts,’ *OSCE Insights* 2021. Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg, pp.161-171, <https://www.nomos-elibrary.de/10.5771/9783748911456.pdf>.

As Wolfgang Zellner highlights, “the OSCE is a deeply norms-based organization”.³⁷ It is an unrivaled reservoir of fifty years’ worth of experience in addressing security challenges in the three security dimensions, which the European Leadership Network recently compiled.³⁸ In a conference-style institution, this whole OSCE acquis would be lost, without any administrative and expert structure to implement it and keep it up to date.

Briefly summarized, the implications of the CSCE 2.0 scenario are far-reaching, suggesting not just an organizational reform, but a retreat from the OSCE’s institutional and normative commitments. With no structure, accountability nor follow-through, a CSCE-like OSCE would resemble the abovementioned EPC: a “stage without a script”, a “talking shop rather than a platform capable of shaping joint European responses to shared challenges.”³⁹ The absence of coordination mechanisms and institutional follow-up would make it ineffective in the long run.

4. Why bringing the OSCE to its pre-1995 roots is a naive and dangerous approach

The idea of reverting the OSCE to a CSCE 2.0 faces both historical and contemporary limitations. Pursuing such a course would seriously undermine the organization’s relevance today. The environment in which the OSCE could flourish prior to 1995 is fundamentally different from the complex and contested landscape it confronts now. A return to older standards would not only marginalize its work and erode its effectiveness, but could also play directly into the hands of an authoritarian Russia and enable coercive approaches to international security.

4.1 History does not repeat itself

Calls to return to a CSCE-style format for the OSCE often neglect the very specific historical conditions that allowed the original Conference to succeed. The Helsinki Final Act was about “deepening and making continuing and lasting the process of detente”,⁴⁰ improving relations between conflicting parties, and increasing mutual confidence. The CSCE functioned effectively during a rare window of opportunity defined by lower levels of geopolitical tension between the Western and the Eastern blocks, and a moment “characterised by shared views of the future”.⁴¹

Yet these enabling factors no longer exist. The CSCE ‘recipes’ – asymmetric bargaining and trade-offs⁴² – are not applicable to 2025. Today’s geopolitical landscape is shaped by renewed confrontation and normative polarization. We have entered a “new era of immense hostility with Moscow”, as Cold War

37 W. Zellner, ‘Adapting to a Changed World: The CSCE/OSCE in 1990 and Today’, *OSCE Yearbook* 2018, pp. 53-65, here p. 60, https://www.ifsh.de/file/publication/OSCE_Yearbook_en/2018/Zellner-en.pdf.

38 See K. Glod, ‘Assessing the OSCE Toolbox: Opportunities for a safer Europe’, European Leadership Network, 2025, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/report/assessing-the-osce-toolbox-opportunities-for-a-safer-europe/>.

39 B. Zorić, ‘A stage without a script? How can the European Political Community live up to its ambition?’, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Commentary, 20 May 2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/commentary/stage-without-script-how-can-european-political-community-live-its-ambition>. See also E. Maurice and T. Schaumann, ‘Without Reform the European Political Community Risks Becoming Irrelevant’, *European Policy Centre*, 2025, <https://www.epc.eu/publication/without-reform-the-european-political-community-risks-becoming-irrelevant/>.

40 Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, Final Act, preamble, Helsinki, 1975, <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>.

41 P. Dunay, ‘History and Background of the CSCE/OSCE’, in *The OSCE in Crisis*, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), 2006, p. 31.

42 A. Zagorski, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.

historian Mary Elise Sarotte famously coined it in the New York Times in 2022.⁴³ The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not only undermined the cooperative spirit once central to the CSCE but also exposed the OSCE's limitations in the face of military aggression and deep value-based divisions among participating States. The conditions that supported the CSCE, especially the presence of relatively cohesive negotiating blocs (NATO and the Warsaw Pact) and neutral mediators, have given way to a more fragmented and asymmetric order in which conflict parties are no longer structurally balanced or mutually invested in institutional outcomes⁴⁴ and have no shared/common views about the future. In such context, a CSCE 2.0 would only manage distrust.

4.2 The CSCE's life was not '*un long fleuve tranquille*'⁴⁵

The CSCE was a successful tool for managing the East-West confrontation. It prepared the ground for overcoming the division of Europe by peaceful means. However, far from the 'golden legend' which celebrates the Final Helsinki Act of 1975 as the beginning of a new era, the Conference had to overcome several existential crises. On some occasions the process was very close to breakdown. Andrei Zagorski recalls that, following the arrest of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "the Conference held its breath." In early 1982 the meeting was suspended for several months following the introduction of martial law in Poland. The medium-range missile crisis, with its peak in 1983-84, paralysed political dialogue in Europe. Frustrated with the lack of progress in the human dimension, the U.S. government considered renouncing the Helsinki Accords and explored practical ways to do so.⁴⁶ Even after the collapse of the communist bloc, the CSCE was not strong enough to effectively counter the sometimes brutal events of the early 1990s.

Against this historical backdrop, pretending that the life of the CSCE was a peaceful and harmonious transition would simply be erroneous. The abovementioned setbacks occurred despite the relatively favourable international climate, suggesting that today's far more hostile and unstable environment would make a return to that model even less viable. A new CSCE-like format would hardly change anything to the basic trends of the crisis in Europe.

4.3 Accelerating the OSCE's marginalization

The OSCE's reverse transformation, in particular the suggestions to either dismantle or render independent its core institutions such as the ODIHR and the HCNM, risk severely weakening the organization's identity and relevance in the international security architecture. These bodies were created precisely because soft, non-binding dialogue alone was insufficient to uphold the OSCE's normative commitments determined in the 1990s.⁴⁷ This institutional structure forms the backbone of what gives the OSCE its distinct identity as a political actor in international security. In times of geopolitical rupture and contestation, preserving this identity is more critical than ever. Rather than reinforcing efficiency, manoeuvres to compromise these institutions would likely result in a hollowed-out OSCE that operates more like a "second and weak Council of Europe", lacking both enforcement power and

43 M.E. Sarotte, 'I'm a Cold War Historian. We're in a Frightening New Era,' *The New York Times*, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/opinion/russia-ukraine-cold-war.html>

44 M. Dembinski and H.-J. Spanger, *op. cit.*

45 Here we refer to the famous French movie directed by Étienne Chatiliez in 1988, *La vie n'est pas un long fleuve tranquille*.

46 A. Zagorski, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

47 P. Dunay, 'History and Background of the CSCE/OSCE', *op. cit.*, pp. 19-33.

a clear purpose.⁴⁸ Turning the autonomous institutions into ‘like minded’ clubs would equally not bring them closer to Moscow’s heart and would not resolve what Andrei Zagorski calls “the clash between Moscow and the human dimension.”⁴⁹ On the contrary, Russia and its allies would be definitely lost for the three institutions. Nothing would remain of the OSCE’s comparative advantage.

4.4 The winner takes it all

Weakening the OSCE – even under the pretext of better ‘saving’ it - at a time of war and systemic repression would not only be a strategic error but would also reward those actors most hostile to the OSCE’s liberal-democratic mandate. Transforming the OSCE back into something akin to the CSCE would mean discarding the third dimension, human rights and democracy and, with it, the institutional innovations like ODIHR that define the post-1990 OSCE framework. This shift would align with Russia’s goal of reversing the commitments made after the Cold War and could allow it to “renegotiate European security norms by force.”⁵⁰

Such a transformation would also risk further isolating civil society in regions like Central Asia, to which the OSCE offers the only institutional link to Europe, providing an entry point into broader political security and normative frameworks. For these regions, the OSCE has been a vital alternative to “falling entirely into Russia’s geopolitical orbit.”⁵¹ Receding from this engagement now would effectively concede regional influence and diminish European leverage. A case in point is Moldova, where Russian rhetoric appears to be increasingly effective and where early signs suggest a soft questioning of ODIHR’s legitimacy, raising concerns about the OSCE’s ability to maintain its credibility and support base in the region.⁵² Marginalizing the OSCE missions and institutions through a return to a pre-1995 setup would therefore create a further rift between Europe and strategic partners in the East.

Weakening the OSCE’s institutional core would thus not depoliticize European security but rather re-politicize it on terms favourable to authoritarian powers and most notably the Kremlin. Any return to a CSCE-style format would not only erase decades of institutional development but also signal acquiescence to coercive revisionism at a time when maintaining democratic resilience is more urgent than ever.

5. The compromise: More CSCE character

The OSCE’s main task will be to find a strong ‘minimal consensus’⁵³ that enables ‘cooperation’ after the end of the war in Ukraine. This minimal consensus can take the shape of a standing OSCE with a “more pronounced CSCE Character.”⁵⁴ While a complete return to the CSCE model carries significant

48 J. Ketola and B. Reynolds, ‘Dialogue for OSCE Renewal – Shifting Security Back to the People’, *Transatlantic Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No 1, Spring 2022, p. 116.

49 A. Zagorski, ‘The Clash between Moscow and the Human Dimension of the CSCE: From Vienna to Copenhagen (1989-1990)’, *OSCE Yearbook* 2005, pp. 47-60, <https://www.ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/05/Zagorski-en.pdf>.

50 Interview, Academic Observer, Vienna, 10 July 2025.

51 *Ibid.*

52 Interview, senior official from a Western/NATO member OSCE pS, Vienna, 17 July 2025.

53 S. J. A. Mason and L. Watanabe, ‘The OSCE in the Stormy Waters of the 21st Century: Introduction and Overview’, in T. Greminger et al., ‘Multilateralism in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities for the OSCE’, CSS, ETH Zurich, 2021, pp. 7–11, https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/Multilateralism_in_Transition.pdf.

54 Interview, former ally country representative, Vienna, 5 August 2025.

pitfalls, this does not preclude rediscovering the OSCE's Cold War origins as a conference⁵⁵ and drawing lessons from its existence and achievements between the 1970s and 1990s. The CSCE's "dialogical relationship between principles and measures"⁵⁶ has been fruitful in getting the Western and Eastern block to one table to talk. Drawing from this rationale would help strengthen open-ended discussion. However, none of this can be pursued at the expense of the current OSCE, nor should it entail a complete return to the CSCE, for the reasons outlined above.

Recollection of the CSCE's record may be an illuminating exercise and a source of inspiration. Speaking in Berlin on November 22, 2021, Finland's former President Sauli 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. Above all and better than a *reductio ad CSCE*, it is essential to preserve this heritage to persevere in dialogue, to strengthen cooperation, and to make diplomacy the privileged path, as Pope Leo XIV underlined at his general audience on July 30, 2025.⁵⁷

Reconnect with the CSCE spirit also means, in our opinion, reconnecting with the original three Helsinki 'baskets'. As always when an institution is in crisis, ground-breaking ideas flourish about how to provide it with a new *raison d'être*, from Arctic affairs to Artificial Intelligence and political dialogue with China. To make a foray into such highly controversial and divisive "out-of-area and 'peripheral' security challenges"⁵⁸ is surely not the best way to restore trust and unity of views within the OSCE. Instead, let us come "back to basics", which was the motto of the Swedish Chairpersonship in 2021. The wise recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2015 remains valid: "the Organization should also focus on further strengthening its comparative advantages and focus primarily on areas where it can add value, without duplicating the work of other organizations in the field. In this context, applying the "less is more" philosophy, which builds on the already existing *acquis* of the organization, sets new realistic objectives and considers the amount of resources available, could bring the best results."⁵⁹

Time to choose: Permanent platform or political theatre?⁶⁰

Assessing an international institution in moments of extreme crisis risks obscuring the significance of its long-term achievements. Russia's current hostility within the European security architecture and the broader erosion of Western multilateralism, amplified by Donald Trump's "America First" agenda, cast a bleak picture of the OSCE's performance. However, these developments must be seen as a snapshot of an exceptional moment, not as a valid basis for dismantling institutional structures that have existed for 30 years.

The only advantage of a CSCE 2.0 would be to prevent the OSCE from being terminated abruptly, but we are not there yet. "The OSCE has its past, it has its present, but it also has its future.", United

55 P. Fritch, 'Helsinki +50: Rediscovering the OSCE's legacy', European Leadership Network, 29 July 2025, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/helsinki50-rediscovering-the-osces-legacy/>.

56 Interview, former ally country representative, Vienna, 5 August 2025.

57 Leo XIV, General audience, Saint Peter's Square, 30 July 2025, <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/audiences/2025/documents/20250730-udienza-generale.html>.

58 A. Bayok and S. Wolff, 'In search of an acceptable purpose: out-of-area and "peripheral" security challenges in the OSCE's second dimension', in: C. Friesendorf and S. Wolff (Eds.), 'Russia's war against Ukraine: Implications for the future of the OSCE', OSCE Network Perspectives, 1/2022, 9-13 https://osce-network.net/fileadmin/user_upload/OSCE_Network_Perspectives_2022_20June_final.pdf.

59 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, 'Building the OSCE for the future', Helsinki +40 Project Final Report, PA.GAL/3/15, 13 July 2015, p. 3.

60 We borrow to B. Zorić, *op. cit.*

States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice remarked when she addressed the Permanent Council on May 31, 2007.⁶¹ The end of Russia's war of aggression, whenever it comes, will inevitably create a new phase in European security. The OSCE must be prepared for this future.⁶² Returning to a CSCE-style dialogue-only format would make it ill-equipped for that task. Instead, the OSCE must see the post-conflict phase not as its downfall but as a political opportunity. In fact, "the day will come when security and cooperation in Europe will have to be rebuilt [and] the OSCE should be ready."⁶³ As a former OSCE delegate suggested, the survival of the OSCE could even be made a "pre-condition for a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine," since it is "in the interest of both Russia and Ukraine to have a forum, a line of contact."⁶⁴

"History will judge this Conference not by what we say here today, but by what we do tomorrow – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep", U.S. President Ford highlighted at the end of his 1975 address in Helsinki.⁶⁵ Giving in to pressure and sending the OSCE back to its roots is not precisely the way to keep these promises.




61 Secretary Condoleezza Rice, *Remarks at the organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*, Vienna, Austria, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/may/85853.htm>.

62 See J. Kininmont and L. Simonet, 'It's time to use the OSCE', Commentary, European Leadership Network, 11 March 2025, <https://europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/its-time-to-use-the-osce/>.

63 J. Ketola and B. Reynolds, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

64 Interview, former permanent representative of an EU country to the OSCE, Vienna, 5 August 2025.

65 *Address by US President Gerald R Ford to the third stage of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe*, Helsinki, 30 July to 1 August 1975, quoted in J. Finley, 'The United States View of the OSCE in 2007: Looking Back and Moving Forward on an Enduring Partnership', OSCE Yearbook 2008, p. 174,



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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