

The Final Act?

The Legacy and Future of the Helsinki Principles and the OSCE at 50



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Introduction

Security and Human Rights Journal

Special Edition: The OSCE at 50

Preface, Historical Context, and the Fundamental Principles

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Preface

Anniversaries are usually moments to celebrate, and to look forward to the future. Sadly, the Golden Jubilee of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act is not such an occasion for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

On 1 August 1975, after more than two years of deliberations, 35 heads of state and government came together in Helsinki for a historical Summit to adopt the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). They were united in their objective of “promoting better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt at their security” and were convinced of “the need to exert efforts to make détente both a continuing and an increasingly viable and comprehensive process, universal in scope.”

Despite these lofty words in the opening paragraphs, few of the signatories and even fewer of the skeptics at that time could have imagined the long-term significance of that document. It made a crucial link between security and human rights, one that lives on in the title of this journal. And it contributed to closer cooperation and stronger accountability among these 35 states. Furthermore, although the Act was seen by many as a way of anchoring a balance of power between East and West during the Cold War, it became a key reference point for those calling for changes within and between states in a divided Europe. Indeed, while it is an oversimplification to say that the Helsinki Final Act paved the way for the erosion of totalitarian Communist regimes in Europe and contributed to drawing aside the Iron Curtain, it certainly changed relations between states as well as between leaders and their people. It also became a rallying point for brave civil society organizations, particularly in the communist bloc, to hold their leaders accountable to the promises that they had made to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It inspired the creation of Helsinki Committees across the OSCE area, including of course the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, under whose auspices the Security and Human Rights Monitor is administered.

Fifteen years after the Helsinki Final Act, the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe proclaimed that the “era of confrontation and division in Europe has ended”, and a “new era of Democracy, Peace and Unity” had begun. In the years to follow, governments agreed to detailed commitments in the politico-military, economic and environmental as well as human dimensions, developing a comprehensive security concept. They created innovative institutions and diplomatic processes to help states turn their commitments into action. Several summits consolidated progress. The CSCE turned into the OSCE. In countries emerging from communist rule, transformation processes were supported, rule of law strengthened, and elections observed. Arms control and confidence-building measures helped peace to take hold. Conflict prevention tools were developed, early warning capacities established, and crisis management mechanisms put in place. Peer review processes were designed to help states track implementation of their commitments. Investigative mechanisms were created to respond to grave human rights violations. Field missions brought support to the national and local levels. Cross-border cooperation intensified.

But the Charter of Paris did not usher in the end of history. Already in the early 1990s, it was evident that the process of post-Cold War transition would not be as easy as some had hoped. Still, problems seemed solvable and challenges manageable, not least by states working together through the OSCE.

That started to change in 2008 already with the Russian invasion of Georgia, then in 2014 with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and in 2022 with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Over the past two decades almost all ten principles of the Helsinki Final Act have been violated. Furthermore, the international order created after the Second World War based on the Charter of the United Nations, adopted 80 years ago, has been shattered.

Danger and complexity are compounded by new threats, including many not foreseen in the Final Act such as climate change, the impact of technology on human rights and security, and transnational threats and challenges such as organized crime, corruption, or forced migration.

As a result, half a century after heads of state and government from two opposing blocs, and the neutral and non-aligned countries in-between, agreed on a forward-looking agenda designed to foster peace, we are far away from recognizing indivisibility of security in Europe, and common interest in the development of cooperation throughout the whole of Europe and beyond is fading. In the OSCE framework, the political and diplomatic process, governed by consensus and a minimum of mutual trust, has all but come to a standstill although operations, institutions and field missions continue to function, even without a formal budget.

If the mood is gloomy and the situation so dire, why have a special issue of this journal? We felt that since the Final Act is the bedrock of the OSCE and the inspiration behind Helsinki Committees, as well as this journal, we could not let the anniversary pass without reflecting on its significance.

That is why we have asked a number of veterans from the Helsinki process to share their personal insights and reflections: to look back; to reflect on what is left of the "spirit of Helsinki" and the principles and commitments of the Final Act; and to look ahead to the prospects for security and cooperation in Europe at such a tumultuous time. The style of the contributions is more essayistic than purely academic, but we wanted to draw on the personal experience of those who have been close to the OSCE in order to give readers valuable insights. It goes without saying that all contributions reflect the views of the writers only, and do not necessarily reflect our view, or that of the journal and its editorial board or the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and its donors.

As OSCE veterans ourselves, we have attempted to provide a broad spectrum of experiences, opinions, and insights about a process which has been exceptional in defining comprehensive security, challenges and responses.

We are grateful to all authors who have responded so enthusiastically, and for their contributions. We are also grateful to the editorial team at Security and Human Rights for embracing this project and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and the donors who have made this possible.

As strong believers in cooperative security and multilateralism, we sincerely hope that we are not witnessing the final act of the OSCE. Rather, we wish that the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act can remind readers of the historical significance of this document, the enduring relevance of its principles, and the need for them to be fully respected for the sake of peace, security, and justice and cooperation within and between states. Our future depends on it.

We hope you will enjoy these pieces and will, in your own way, reflect on the historical significance and enduring legacy of the Helsinki Final Act.

The Helsinki Final Act: Historical Context

The Helsinki Final Act, signed on 1 August 1975, is both an historically significant document, and the basis for cooperative security in Europe.

The idea of convening a conference on European security was already floated in the 1950s, both by Winston Churchill in 1953, and then by the USSR in 1954. The idea was promoted by the Warsaw Pact, particularly as a way of maintaining the status quo in Europe – which is precisely why it was opposed by NATO countries.

In April 1969, the USSR again proposed that all European countries would take steps to summon a European security conference. Finland sought to generate support for the idea, and undertook shuttle diplomacy to organize a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. However, the West insisted on talks to reduce conventional armed forces in Europe, and substantial progress on the questions of Germany and Berlin. As time went on, some Western countries also pushed for consideration of the issue of the free movement of people, information and idea – what became known as “the human dimension”. Sufficient progress on these issues was made by late 1972, which enabled planning to begin on preparatory meetings for a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.

The Helsinki Consultations took place in three stages between July 1973 and July 1975. A Summit, attended by the Heads of State and Government of the 35 CSCE countries, was held in Helsinki between 30 July and 1 August 1975. The Final Act was signed on 1 August 1975.

The Helsinki Final Act is regarded as a keystone of the European security architecture, particularly because of its ten principles guiding relations between states.

The Ten Fundamental Principles

As part of the Helsinki dialogue, all CSCE participating States committed themselves to ten fundamental principles in the Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States, under basket one of the Helsinki Final Act.

I. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty

II. Refraining from the threat or use of force

III. Inviolability of frontiers

IV. Territorial integrity of states

V. Peaceful settlement of disputes

VI. Non-intervention in internal affairs

VII. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief

VIII. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples

IX. Co-operation among States

X. Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law

The Declaration notes that all ten principles “are of primary significance and that, accordingly, they will be equally and unreservedly applied, each of them being interpreted taking into account the others.”



Section 1: Security and Cooperation

Security and Human Rights Journal

Special Edition: The OSCE at 50

The Collapse of the International Legal Order?

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Abstract

We are largely back in the world which we remember from the 19th century with its balance-of-power politics, where imperialism was dominant and the major powers largely determined what was ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. The more sophisticated international legal order which was developed over the years in the 20th century has been seriously undermined in the first decades of the 21st century.

The key question now is how to proceed from this presently disastrous situation: is the international legal order in a terminal stage? We always should keep in mind that there will come a time – hopefully sooner rather than later – that states will have to rebuild the international legal system, and it would be unwise if we would then have to restart from scratch. Therefore, we need new leadership in rescuing at least some key components of the legal order, including preferably the OSCE Decalogue of Principles. It seems that this pivotal role rests primarily with Western states in Europe, Canada and the Pacific. However, it is both necessary and feasible to engage also a number of developing countries, in particular those which have borne the brunt of the legal order’s dramatic deterioration of the legal order in recent years.

Introduction

When the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) was signed fifty years ago, at the culmination point of détente in the Cold War period, it was clear that the development of public international law had reached a new milestone. The well-known Decalogue of Principles had elaborated existing standards and partially developed new standards which have had a great impact on the international law system in the last decades. Although this document was only politically binding, it had a great impact on the development of international law in the decades following the signing of the HFA. The Decalogue became a cornerstone of the European security architecture and is often considered as a document whose contents have acquired the status of customary international law.

In this essay I want to explore briefly in how far this achievement is still relevant in the present, turbulent international arena where respect for international law seems to have vanished to a high extent. The actions by the Russian Federation, the People’s Republic of China and now also by the Trump administration in Washington show outright contempt for the basic norms which have been valid for decades. The question now is: Are we really back in the 19th century when balance-of-power politics, imperialism, nationalism, economic strength, and Realpolitik were the main factors determining international relations? Or may there still be hope that some of the achievements of the OSCE process in this legal area can be rescued? It is clear that we are speaking not only about the OSCE process, but about the international legal order at large.

Achievements of the OSCE process in the area of international law

The international legal order has benefitted greatly from the adoption of the HFA in 1975. The Decalogue of Principles constituted a unique document as it elaborated and further developed the existing fundamental principles of international law, focusing on the European context. The Decalogue contained many remarkable elements, not all of which will be highlighted in this piece. It is worth noting, however, that for the first time in history, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms has been recognized as a fundamental principle of international law (Principle VII). Similarly, highly important topics as ‘cooperation among States’ (Principle IX) and ‘fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law’ (Principle X) were listed as fundamental principles. In order to make sure that no principle would be considered less important than another, the Decalogue unambiguously stated the following: “All the principles set forth above are of primary significance and, accordingly, they will be equally and unreservedly applied, each of them being interpreted taking into account the others” (Principle X).

Another important aspect of the Decalogue was related to Principle III about the ‘Inviolability of Borders’. This principle aimed at once and for all recognizing the post-war borders in Europe (highly necessary as at that time several frontiers were still controversial, such as the Polish-German Oder-Neisse border). At the same time, in Principle I on ‘Sovereignty’, it was stated: “They consider that their frontiers can be changed, in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement.” This element of ‘peaceful change’ was an important goal of the Western states. It made it clear that by mutual agreement among states, changes of borders are legitimate. However, this could never happen by force, which was outlawed in Principle II.

Impact of OSCE on development of international law

The HFA had a major influence on the interpretation and further development of international law standards, even though it was clear that the Decalogue and the HFA as such had a strong European focus. One example is the regulation of the rights of (national or ethnic) minorities at the international level. Following the HFA, the ‘Copenhagen Document on the Human Dimension of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE’, adopted in 1990, played an important role in this context. The Copenhagen Document was the first international political agreement to provide a comprehensive and detailed set of commitments on the rights of national minorities, which subsequently had a strong influence on the drafting of new rules on minority rights both in the UN and the Council of Europe. In the UN context it had a noticeable impact on the drafting of the General Assembly Resolution 47/135 with the well-known Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities. This resolution was adopted without a vote in December 1992.

Another clear example of the CSCE influence on law making constituted the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (1994), which aimed at giving legally binding force to the politically binding CSCE commitments on minority rights at the time.

Similarly, in many bilateral treaties on ‘cooperation, friendship and good neighbourliness’ among, in particular, states from Central and Eastern Europe, clauses can be found which gave legally binding force on political C/OSCE commitments, in particular in the area of the protection of minority rights.¹

1 See e.g. Arie Bloed and Pieter van Dijk (Eds.), *Protection of Minority Rights through Bilateral Treaties – The Case of Central and Eastern Europe* (Leyden 2000).

Although I could give many more examples, let me, finally, also refer to the developing interpretation of the basic principle of non-intervention in internal affairs. This principle had always been invoked by states to prevent other states of expressing their concerns about worrisome developments inside the former. Time and again it has been confirmed that ‘the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned’ (preamble of the 1991 Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE). This interpretation became also the general standard for commitments in the political-military area.² Ultimately this resulted in the perspective of the OSCE as a ‘community of values’ and a ‘community of responsibility’. This was a major achievement, certainly in comparison with the much more restrictive interpretation of the non-intervention principle in the UN context, outside the OSCE area. Even though this development had been reversed to a high extent in the last two decades, when relations with Moscow soured and a number of OSCE participating States started favoring the old, restrictive interpretation again, it is still a legal development worthy of mentioning.

These examples demonstrate clearly how important the role of the OSCE has been in initiating and stimulating law making processes at the international level. This is not limited to a so-called ‘soft law’ process alone, but this process also implied the transformation of OSCE’s most basic principles and norms into standards of regional customary international law. In this way, several OSCE commitments acquired binding legal force.³ I am mentioning this, in particular, because it demonstrates how important the role of the OSCE as a political organization has been and why it is crucial to aim at rescuing this from oblivion because it will be strongly needed when stability will be reestablished at the European continent.

However, even though the OSCE’s role in this area has been important, these standards clearly have not been able to prevent a number of highly disturbing developments in the international arena in the last two decades.

Violation of basic principles of international law: the case of the Russian Federation

Developments in the first decades of the 21st century have demonstrated the fragility of these fundamental principles of law within the OSCE area and the wider world. In spite of basic principles such as, in particular, ‘inviolability of borders’, ‘refraining from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State’, the ‘territorial integrity of States’ and ‘non-intervention in internal affairs’, practice has shown how all of these and other principles have been grossly violated by a major member of the OSCE community.

Although the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 could to some extent still be ‘justified’ as a response to the Georgian military action against South-Ossetia, the situation worsened in 2014. When the Russian Federation (RF) sent its notorious ‘little green men’ without identification marks to Ukraine’s Crimea, followed by the Russian annexation of this territory, the world was witnessing a major violation

² This was authoritatively confirmed in Art. 1 of the 1994 Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security which was adopted at the OSCE Budapest Summit. In this document the OSCE states ‘emphasize that the full respect for all CSCE principles embodied in the Helsinki Final Act and the implementation in good faith of all commitments undertaken in the CSCE are of fundamental importance for stability and security, and consequently constitute a matter of direct and legitimate concern to all of them.’

³ See e.g. Eric Manton, ‘The OSCE Human Dimension Process and the Process of Customary International Law Formation’, in: *OSCE Yearbook*, 2005 (Baden-Baden 2006), pp. 195-214.

of fundamental legal principles: it became clear that the international standards of *jus cogens*⁴ would not prevent Moscow from undertaking its imperialistic goals. Although the organization of a ‘referendum’ among the Crimean population about the territory joining the RF could to some extent still be considered as evidence that even Moscow felt obliged to comply with international standards, the way it was organized was nothing more than a scam. The outcome of 97% in favour of integration with Russia was just something that nobody outside the Russian orbit would take seriously.⁵ Although Russia denied its involvement in the military operations in the Donbass area in 2014, no independent observer doubted the substantial support by the Russians in the start of the civil war against Ukraine at that time. There could be no doubt that the RF was committing aggression against its neighbouring state. The ‘authorities’ of the self-proclaimed people’s republics of Luhansk and Donetsk would not have been able to achieve their military ‘successes’ without the support of a major external force, i.e. Moscow.

The climax of all this came with the Russian-dubbed ‘special military operation’ by the Russians against Ukraine in February 2022. It was nothing more than all-out aggression against the Ukrainian state with the aim to bring about a regime change in Kyiv and bringing this independent country under Russian control. The serious effects of the war on innocent Ukrainian civilians until the present day cannot be overestimated.⁶

Although in particular Western countries strongly protested against the Russian operations, other countries supported Moscow, or were less vocal in their opposition. In this context, the Chinese actions are indicative, as it is clear that Beijing provides substantial military and political support to the Russians. Although the Chinese authorities always try to explain their international policies with references to respect for international legal standards, in particular the norms of ‘non-intervention’, ‘equality and mutual respect’, ‘sovereignty’ and ‘peaceful resolution of disputes’, unfortunately their actions are regularly in violation of these same standards. Power politics turn out to be more decisive than the normative framework of the international legal order. In this context the Chinese bullying actions towards all other coastal states of the South-China Sea don’t need any further explanation: China also adheres in practice more to power politics than to international norms.

New US administration threatens to undermine the international legal order even further

With the new US administration under President Donald Trump, since January 2025 the international legal order seems to be under direct threat even more. Immediately after taking office, Trump started threatening old-time allies with interventions which until recently would have been considered unthinkable. It started with his plan to ‘buy’ Greenland from Denmark, a close NATO ally, followed by direct threats against the Danish government if they would not be willing to comply with his demands. Canada, another close ally and neighbour, got the message that it should become a new federal republic in the USA federation and Trump started even addressing his Canadian counterpart as “Governor”. Panama got the message that the Americans could take over the Panama Canal because of high passage tariffs and Chinese influence, if need be, by the use of force. Although sometimes the messages seem to get mitigated somewhat, in the core they remain the same and are clear threats in violation of international law.

4 *Jus cogens* or ‘compelling law’ are standards which are generally recognized as obligatory on *all* states and from which no derogation is allowed under any circumstances. There is large agreement that such peremptory norms are, among others, the prohibitions of aggression, genocide, slavery and torture.

5 The simple fact that around ten percent of the Crimean population consisted of Tatars, who were and are strongly against a Russian takeover of the territory, is already a sign of how fraudulent the ‘referendum’ was.

6 OSCE’s ODIHR published six interim reports on violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights in Ukraine (see: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/537287>).

Trump's attitude towards Article 5 of the NATO treaty, which provides for collective defense in case of an armed attack on one or more of the member states of the alliance, is also a violation of the treaty by making it conditional on the level of defense spending by the member states. Although there is nothing wrong with the American demand of higher defense spending by its allies, this 'conditionality' of the application of Article 5 comes close to blackmail.

The Trump administration also managed to undermine the global network of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements by ruthlessly imposing tariffs on imports from almost all other countries under the pretext that the US is in an economic 'emergency situation' and that trade with the US is a 'privilege' and not an entitlement. Effective legal means to address this legal anomaly hardly exist, so the possibilities that Trump can be 'called to order' are virtually absent.⁷ 'Classical' instruments of reprisal seem to be the only tools the international community has left to counter the American blackmail, but in view of America's power position it is not likely that reprisal actions will be effective.

How all this can be reconciled with the most fundamental principles of international law such as those on 'non-aggression', 'respect for sovereignty' and '*pacta sunt servanda*' remains a mystery. It seems that the US government in line with the RF is also back in the 19th century when power politics was the dominant policy in international relations.

Apart from these appalling moves by the new Trump administration, its approach of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was even more a surprise. Instead of continuing a united Western front against the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the administration opened the door for Moscow. Washington opted for a direct negotiation with Moscow, aimed at bringing about an end to the conflict without the participation of Ukraine itself, or its Western allies. What is even more worrisome is that the US president started referring to his Ukrainian colleague as a 'dictator', who holds power without legitimate elections, whereby he also started to repeat the Russian narrative that the war was provoked and started by Ukraine. In other words: suddenly the Americans opted for the Russian perspective on the war. Before negotiations even could start, the Americans recognized the territorial gains by the Russians as something that could not be undone, at the same time withdrawing their consent to a commitment which would allow Ukraine to become a member of NATO. It does not need any explanation that the regime in Moscow was extremely pleased: without any negotiations they got a major part of what they wanted (territorial gains, neutralization of Ukraine, political withdrawal of Americans from the European scene) and a total sidelining of the European NATO and EU states. The pressure on the Ukrainian authorities to give the Americans direct access to their deposits of rare earth materials in exchange for further military support would also not qualify as behaviour in line with international minimum standards. This action was largely considered to be undue pressure as experts consider the conditions to be exploitative, warning of long-term economic burdens for Ukraine in the longer term.⁸ Moreover, the threat to withhold further military aid if Ukraine would not accept a deal in this area is a direct violation of, in particular, the non-intervention principle.⁹

7 See e.g. the article published by *Deutsche Welle* by Andreas Becker, 'Trump Tariffs: Can US be punished for breaking trade laws?', in: <https://www.dw.com/en/can-us-be-punished-for-imposing-tariffs/a-71788197>

8 See, e.g., the Eurasia Daily Monitor of 26 February 2025.

9 Principle VI of the HFA Decalogue states, among others: "They will likewise in all circumstances refrain from any other act of military, or of political, economic or other coercion designed to subordinate to their own interest the exercise by another participating State of the rights inherent in its sovereignty and thus to secure advantages of any kind."

This 'blackmail deal' did not get to the stage of signature (yet), after the shocking meeting between Zelensky and Trump in the Oval Office in the White House on the last day of February 2025.¹⁰

Whatever 'grand project design or strategy' may be behind all these troublesome maneuvers by the US, it is clear that all these initiatives constituted a major undermining of what had been left of the international legal order. If the military most powerful country in the world is not even refraining from making direct threats of a military nature to its closest allies, as well as raising serious doubts about its legal obligations to assist its partners in case of attack by other states (in particular the European NATO states), it is no exaggeration to consider the norms-based international legal order to be in need of life support.

The international legal order: the present appalling state

The key question now is how to proceed from this presently ruinous situation of the international legal order. The checks and balances which were key elements of this order seem to have been abolished by the main players, the RF, the US, and to some extent also the People's Republic of China. Aggression and (threat with the) use of force seem to have been accepted as handy tools in international relations as well as the sad fact that territorial gains as a result of military aggression are recognized: the American acceptance/recognition of the Russian territorial expansion on Ukrainian territory can hardly be seen differently.

It also seems logical to conclude that the Decalogue of Principles as enshrined in the HFA has been fatally wounded, and one may argue that practice demonstrates that main actors seem no longer to feel bound by the key principles of international law. So, let us be realistic and call a spade a spade: the international legal order has been undermined to such an extent that it basically ceased to exist, in spite of statements which try to aim in the opposite direction. However, does this all mean that once peace and stability in Europe have been restored to some extent that the old legal norms are no longer valid?

I think that this conclusion cannot (yet) be drawn. The indignation and official protest from, in particular, Western states against both the Russian aggression and the American threats of the use of force against some of their allies demonstrate that these Western key players in the international arena are strongly adhering to the rules of the international order as it has been developed in particular in the last century. Although their protests against the American misbehaviour may be expressed somewhat diplomatically in order not to totally disturb their relations with the 'big brother', the indignation about this behaviour is clear. And this indignation is clearly based on the perception that such behaviour is illegal and, therefore, unacceptable.

The role of the OSCE in this context is also relevant. Although the organization is totally paralyzed as a result of the Russian hostage taking of the OSCE, facilitated by its well-known consensus principle, the various OSCE institutions – which function *de facto* more or less autonomous – make it abundantly clear that they judge the Russian (and American?) actions as clear violations of the most fundamental OSCE principles. And it is also not without significance that in spite of the many condemnations of its behaviour, the RF did not opt for leaving the organization. Therefore, it continues to be accountable to the international community for its violations of many OSCE commitments and principles.

¹⁰ After a 'cooling-off' period on 30 April 2025 the US and Ukraine signed a rare earth deal with a more acceptable contents than what the Americans at first had in mind.

However, the most important aspect of the international legal order is reciprocity, mutual respect and trust, and it is obvious that this no longer exist. The major actors in the world simply no longer trust each other and, therefore, effective 'deals' are extremely hard to achieve. The situation becomes even worse when players are no longer interested in 'facts' and base their decisions on 'alternative facts' which often are outright untrue. It will require generations to rebuild confidence and it is clear that the world will remain a volatile and dangerous place for a long time to come. But without a minimum of confidence international principles and norms can hardly be expected to have a decisive impact. The rules of the jungle, as practiced during the old-fashioned power politics of the last decades, and, in particular, the fact that there are (territorial) 'benefits' to be gained from aggression against neighbouring states, will not be so easily sidelined anymore.

The international legal order: can it still be rescued?

Of course, it is obvious that whenever the guns go silent in the Russian war against Ukraine, the European security architecture requires a serious restructuring in which the roles of organizations like the EU, NATO and OSCE will be redefined. Although it is tempting to reflect on this new security architecture, I want to focus, in particular, on the legal basis for this new system.

Since the present essay is focused on the 50th anniversary of the HFA, let us consider first the future of the HFA Decalogue. In my opinion, it would be ideal if this document could be formally reconfirmed by all OSCE participating States, but it is highly unlikely that even a partial reconfirmation could be achieved. This is also due to the fact that the OSCE, since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has become a vocal tool against Russian aggression. Of course, the consensus principle prevented the adoption of formal OSCE decisions on this matter, but statements by the OSCE institutions, the Chair-in-Office, and other more or less autonomous bodies, show a common pattern - i.e. a strong condemnation of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In these circumstances, it is highly unlikely that Moscow would be willing to accept a reconfirmation of this fundamental OSCE document, as this would basically imply a return to the 'old order'. And it is clear that Moscow (and others) are exactly trying to change that old order. Nevertheless, the (Western) OSCE States should continue to hammer on a reconfirmation of the full Decalogue.

An alternative approach could be to aim for a conditional formal reconfirmation: a reconfirmation with the simultaneous agreement that the Decalogue needs to be 'updated' through renegotiations. The benefit would be that formally the document would still be at the basis of the OSCE and, therefore, at the basis also of the future European security architecture. However, in practice it could turn out to be largely an empty shell, as 'renegotiations' would mean that all parties basically agree that at least parts of the old Decalogue may no longer applicable: the fact that a revision of the document is necessary implies that something is 'wrong' with its contents, thereby immediately affecting its authority. Perhaps deciding on a 're-interpretation' instead of a 'renegotiation' or 'revision' of the Decalogue could be compromise. If case states would decide just on a renegotiation or revision or updating of the Decalogue, this could mean that we would be back at 'square one, as it is clear that in the present circumstances it is almost unthinkable that consensus could be reached on new texts about such sensitive issues like 'sovereignty', 'inviolability of borders', 'self-determination of people' or 'non-intervention in internal affairs'. In other words, opening renegotiations about the contents of the Decalogue could be the final blow for its relevance. Moreover, efforts to revise the Decalogue seem wishful thinking right now, as the necessary minimum level of mutual trust among the key actors is absent. But there will be a time that states will have to rebuild international relations, and then it will be extremely useful to have the Decalogue formally still on the table. Even though the document has now become highly 'aspirational', that would be a better outcome than just starting from scratch.

If this assessment is correct, and the existing legal order as outlined in the Decalogue will be very hard to be rescued, the result would be that we need to return to the principles as laid down in the UN Charter of 1945, which are of a more general nature than the more elaborated OSCE principles from the Decalogue. These principles have been further elaborated in an authoritative way in General Assembly Resolution 2526 (1970): 'the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Co-operation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations'. In contrast to the OSCE documents, the UN Charter has legally binding force, even though its basic principles have been grossly violated. This is clear as both the RF and the US have acted in violation of these principles, both by the Russian aggression against Ukraine and by the above-mentioned interventions of the new Trump-administration against some of its close allies (in particular, Denmark, Canada, Panama), as well as Ukraine. It seems that a reconfirmation of these UN principles is also a necessary prerequisite for a future legal order. However, the fact that the Russian Foreign Minister is precisely pleading for respect for these principles in a time when his country is massively violating these principles, demonstrates the challenges ahead, but at the same time it may offer a starting point for discussions about the future of the international legal order.¹¹

Conclusion

All in all, the future of the international legal order looks extremely bleak, in particular since key players in the world (RF, US and China) do not demonstrate compliance with its most basic norms and principles any more. Although the EU bloc still vocally shows that it wants to keep the existing legal order in place, it right now finds itself with this aim in a lonely place in the world. The battle for the survival of the international legal order is in a precarious phase, and the prospects of success in the short term are gloomy. Thanks to the most powerful actors in the world, in particular also the US administration which in the past claimed the role of the champion of the free world based on a norm-based legal order, we are now full speed on the road to a lawless international system where the major checks and balances have been destroyed. The building of a new legal order will be a huge challenge, and in this area it is of the greatest importance now more than ever that the Western countries of Europe, Canada and the Pacific take the lead in rescuing and rebuilding the legal order. At the end of the day, all states need to realize that an effective and credible international legal order is also to their own benefit. However, it is likely that in the rebuilding phase special attention will be given not only to formal agreements (the norms and principles), but in particular also to their enforceability. The discussions on the conditions for a ceasefire in Ukraine is telling in that respect: a ceasefire seems only feasible if it will be accompanied by effective security guarantees for Ukraine from third parties. In other words: just words, even though framed in formally legally binding terms, are no longer sufficient. Until confidence and trust will be restored, which will take a very long time.

11 See the article by RF Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, in which he complains about the selective application and disregard of the fundamental principles of international law. It's no surprise that he is blaming other actors for this behaviour instead of his own government. See S.V. Lavrov, *Pravovym fundamentom mnogopoliarnogo mira dolzhen stat' Ustav OON* [The legal basis of a multipolar world must be the UN Charter], in: *Rossia v global'noi politike*, 2025, March-April, pp. 51-58.

Rebuilding Peace and Security in the OSCE Area

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of conflict demands renewed approaches to peace and security, particularly within the OSCE region. The authors argue that the growing number, duration, and complexity of conflicts—exacerbated by technology, geopolitical rivalries, and declining international mediation—require stronger preventive diplomacy, inclusive dialogue, and people-centered solutions. The article underscores the relevance of the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, and the OSCE’s unique tools for monitoring, mediation, and peacebuilding. Emphasizing leadership, regional cooperation, and “long-view” strategies, the authors call for revitalized diplomacy, effective conflict prevention, and the restoration of trust as foundations for a renewed European security framework.

Introduction

It is often said that we are living through a period of change, a *Zeitenwende*. The nature of conflict is indeed changing: there are more of them, and many are of long duration. The human costs are high. Technology is having a growing impact, both on how wars are being fought and on efforts to make peace. If the world is changing, then diplomacy and mediation need to adapt. This article looks at some of the salient challenges to international peace and security, and emphasizes the importance of conflict prevention, mediation, diplomacy and peacemaking. It also underlines the enduring relevance of the spirit and fundamental principles of the United Nations Charter and the Helsinki Final Act and highlights the potential of the OSCE.

The changing nature of conflict

Until about a decade ago, there was a downward trend in the number of violent conflicts in the world. Over the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in interstate conflicts: in 2011 there were 33, in 2023 there were 59¹. The pace and intensity of violence seem to be increasing. Even during the period of writing this article, deadly clashes broke out between Iran and Israel, as well as India and Pakistan. As a result of so many simultaneous conflicts around the world, large numbers of people have been killed and millions displaced. Indeed, according to the UN Secretary General, in 2022, a quarter of the world’s population, nearly two billion people, lived in conflict-affected areas² and as of mid-2024 122 million had been displaced³.

Not only are there more wars, they are lasting longer – many for more than a decade. Think of conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Ukraine. Some countries or regions are also trapped in long and deadly cycles of violence: such as Haiti, Sudan, and the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza.

These cycles of violence are turning like deadly wheels in a clockwork of conflict that has a seemingly unstoppable movement. Furthermore, there is a dangerous tendency within and between states to forward political aims by threats, force and violence rather than by diplomacy.

At the same time, peacemaking is in retreat. UN-led or UN-assisted political processes (Libya, Sudan and

1 <https://www.uu.se/en/press/press-releases/2024/2024-06-03-ucdp-record-number-of-armed-conflicts-in-the-world>

2 <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-chief-2-billion-people-live-in-conflict-areas-today/6509020.html>

3 <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance#:~:text=How%20many%20refugees%20are%20there,forced%20to%20flee%20their%20homes.>

Yemen) have stalled or collapsed. There has been a withdrawal of peace operations in parts of Africa; in some cases they have been criticized for becoming part of the problem. Other stabilization efforts have also faltered; the American withdrawal from Afghanistan is a high-profile example. There seems to be little appetite for the international community to engage in difficult situations such as Haiti or Sudan, and mediation by the United Nations has lost considerable relevance and profile. As a result, there is insufficient leadership for peace, and the very organizations that have been designed to promote and maintain security are handicapped by an overwhelming number of crises, a deficit of political will, and a dearth of resources for humanitarian assistance and peace operations, not least because of the costs of conflict and weapons procurement.

Priorities, prevention and anticipation

For diplomats trying to fight so many fires, it is vital to deal with the most urgent situations first and to prevent them from getting worse. In the OSCE area, the priority should obviously be ending the war in Ukraine. Indeed, with so many challenges to international peace and security, regional organizations like the OSCE need to step up, for example in promoting dialogue and facilitation.

The OSCE has had a relatively low profile in Ukraine since the withdrawal of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in 2021. While states, rather than organizations, will likely be the ones to make peace, implementation of any peace agreements may require the support of organizations that enjoy the political buy-in of a wide number of states and which have the tools to carry out monitoring and verification. The OSCE could play such a role, building on its experience. After all, monitoring is crucial to provide unbiased information, particularly when there is a lack of trust between the parties. The SMM's operational reporting in Ukraine between 2014 and 2021 was a rare source of independent monitoring of events on the ground. There may be a role for the OSCE to monitor and verify a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, when the time comes.

But only focusing on the crises of the day risks overlooking the warning signs of slower burning situations that could erupt into conflict in the future. Therefore, a greater emphasis should be placed on prevention. After all, as it says in the preamble of the UN Charter, a priority of “we the peoples of the United Nations”, was “to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”. And the signatories of the Helsinki Final Act underscored their objective of “promoting better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt against their security”.

In *A New Agenda for Peace*, UN Secretary General Guterres called for a stronger focus on preventive diplomacy such as in Chapter VI of the Charter that focuses on the peaceful settlement of disputes. He also called for making more effective use of regional arrangements under Chapter VIII of the Charter.⁴

The OSCE has plenty of cutting-edge tools at its disposal when it comes to conflict prevention, such as the good offices of the Secretary General and the Chair, the early warning function of field activities and fact-finding missions, as well as the quiet diplomacy of the High Commissioner on National Minorities. What is often lacking is the leadership, both within these organizations and among their members, to use these tools and instruments. The OSCE Troika, in 2025 consisting of Malta, Finland and Switzerland, is well-placed to promote dialogue and facilitation while the new Secretary General, Feridun Sinirioğlu (from Türkiye) can use his good offices and vast diplomatic experience to promote and position the OSCE and to help de-escalate

4 <https://dppa.un.org/en/a-new-agenda-for-peace>

tensions. Together, the Secretary General and the Troika can also mobilize greater support for diplomatic solutions to the conflict. But leadership should not be left to the Troika and SG alone: all participating States with a stake in European security need to make more effective use of the OSCE.

States should not only preserve and strengthen the OSCE as a forum for dialogue and a collective resource for reducing tensions in all phases of the conflict cycle, they should also make use of the field missions and institutions that they have created. The latter can help to build the institutions and capacity that are the bulwark of stable, harmonious and well-governed states. In that respect, the OSCE's role in peacebuilding and achieving Sustainable Development Goal number 16 ('Peace, justice and strong institutions') deserves more credit and support.

In addition to preventive diplomacy and peacebuilding, more time and attention need to be devoted to anticipating potential threats and challenges to try to mitigate or prepare for them. This is what "The Elders" have called 'long-view leadership'⁵, characterized, for example, by thinking beyond short-term political cycles and delivering solutions for both current and future generations. Therefore, it is encouraging that the Pact for the Future, agreed in November 2024, takes a forward-looking perspective. Regional organizations should follow suit. The OSCE, for example, should start thinking about the future of European security, not only after the war in Ukraine, but also in the context of a number of threats and challenges on the horizon that could seriously impact all participating States. Such an inclusive, comprehensive and participatory process could restore confidence in the OSCE, and strengthen a culture of dialogue and common purpose among participating States. At a minimum, it could manage distrust in a way that will reduce risks and make Europe safer. This would be consistent with one of Finland's priorities as chair of the OSCE in 2025, namely preparing for the future.

Rediscovering diplomacy and dialogue

International relations today are too often characterized by transactionalism and public monologues. Such an approach is having limited returns, even for great powers. Instead, what is needed is more diplomacy, dialogue and empathy or mindfulness. Too often, positions are entrenched. There is no willingness to listen to the other side, let alone talk to them. The result is policy-making via public statements or social media. This may play well to a domestic audience, but it does not lead to compromise or peace. On the contrary, it may whip up tensions and deepen mistrust.

To counter-act this trend, it is vital to rediscover diplomacy and dialogue. This means having open channels of communication. It means listening to the views of the other side, demonstrating a degree of mindfulness of the positions of others. This is particularly important for mediators. They need to show impartiality, fairness, understanding and respect and act with a degree of humility.⁶ As a result, even if parties do not trust each other, they can at least have a degree of trust in the negotiation process. Mediators will also have to possess great patience and a good sense of timing. The right ideas need to be put forward at the right time. Preparation and follow-up are also vital; meetings in isolation build little momentum.

5 <https://theelders.org/news/what-long-view-leadership-and-why-are-elders-calling-it>

6 The European Union's Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding, interview with E. Apakan, ENTER Policy Brief Series Policy Brief: A Practitioner's View No. 12 – November 2022, https://foreignpolicynewrealities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Policy_Brief_No_12_rev.pdf

To create a greater pool of qualified mediators, there should be a more systematic approach to learning, training and knowledge-sharing in the field of mediation. This is particularly important as great powers and new actors are becoming more engaged in mediation – often with good intentions but little experience. Furthermore, there needs to be greater innovation in the mediation space in order to cope with the plethora of conflicts, new challenges and opportunities afforded by technology, the impact of violent non-state actors, and engaging more women and civil society actors in mediation processes.⁷ In the past, Türkiye and Finland (later joined by Switzerland) established a “Friends of Mediation” group in the United Nations. Today, mediation needs more friends, more resources, and more attention. In addition to Finland as chair of the OSCE in 2025, Switzerland as in-coming OSCE chair and Türkiye, as peacemaker in the Black Sea and bridge-builder between Ukraine and Russia, have important roles to play, as does Norway, as chair of the Structured Dialogue.

The OSCE’s engagement in Ukraine between 2014 and 2021 showed both the challenges and merits of mediation. Numerous meetings of the context of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) on Ukraine were often difficult. But they helped to engage the relevant actors, provided a rare venue for inter-action, and obliged the parties to focus on concrete issues such as demining, concrete humanitarian issues, and negotiating local ceasefires. The TCG also established a clear link between the security and political elements of dealing with the conflict, and factoring in humanitarian and economic issues under a comprehensive approach to building security and trust.

The mandate of the SMM was also broad enough that changes in the situation on the ground did not require amendments. It should be recalled that when the SMM mandate was adopted in March 2014, there was no serious fighting in Ukraine and certainly no Minsk agreements. The word “ceasefire” is also not mentioned in the mandate. But within months, as the security situation deteriorated, this civilian monitoring mission was transformed into a ceasefire monitoring force closely linked – at least in the eyes of the parties – to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. The mission also made effective use of technology, such as drones and cameras. That said, technology should be regarded as a complement rather than a substitute to human monitors.⁸ Here, it is worth paying tribute to the brave men and women of the SMM whose very presence and tireless reporting made a difference, both as an unbiased source of information and for providing support to the civilian population in the conflict zone.⁹

Another key lesson learned is the need for a clear link between the political and the operational. The OSCE was not a party to the Minsk Agreements, it was also not a member of the Normandy Group. Yet, the OSCE is still criticized by some despite the fact that it had no political oversight of the agreements it was supposed to be helping to implement. If, in the future, there is a ceasefire agreement and monitoring mission in Ukraine, one would hope that the UN and/or the OSCE would be the “mother organization” that provides a political mandate and framework. In this way, political processes and field operations could be more closely synchronized than in the past. While monitoring is a technical exercise, it is inherently a political venture. Therefore, if the OSCE is to be called on to monitor a ceasefire, it should be involved at an early stage in the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement.

7 <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/peacemaking-in-trouble-waldman.pdf>

8 See https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/MediationResources21_CeasefireMonitoringTechnology.pdf

9 For more on the SMM see “A Peaceful Presence: The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine”, OSCE Conflict Prevention Center 2021, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/6/491220_0.pdf

After all, a peace operation is a highly political endeavour, not least one that would separate Ukrainian and Russian forces after such a long and bloody conflict. It therefore needs to be connected to a political settlement and have a politically endorsed mandate. Furthermore, the parties need to be held accountable for any violations of the ceasefire. One of the lessons learned from past experience in Ukraine is that there were few ways of holding the sides accountable for ceasefire violations. A compliance and accountability mechanism, such as a joint military commission, will be vital. Lessons can be learned from the Joint Centre of Control and Coordination, composed of senior Ukrainian and Russian officers between 2014 and 2017, and other relevant international experiences.¹⁰

People first

Another lesson learned from the OSCE's experience in Ukraine and elsewhere, is the need for a strong focus on the plight of ordinary people. There is a tendency, when talking about conflict, to focus on maps, compare the size of military forces, or to count numbers such as drone strikes or the amount of ammunition expended. Human suffering is often overlooked.

Moving forward, the emphasis on diplomacy should be on putting people first and ensuring their safety and security. A priority should be the protection of civilians from attacks, particularly children and the elderly in armed conflict. The atrocities that we have seen in recent years in Ukraine, Gaza, Syria, Ethiopia and elsewhere do not belong in the modern world, and are a violation of many of the fundamental principles of the UN Charter and Helsinki Final Act which we commemorate this year.

Greater efforts and resources also need to be devoted to reaching and caring for people in need. A growing number of conflicts, coupled with greater inequality and the impact of climate change, result in more people suffering. In 2023, one out of 11 people in the world, and one out of every five in Africa, faced hunger¹¹. And when it comes to humanitarian assistance, there is a major disconnect between pledges for humanitarian assistance and money disbursed.

Even where there is political deadlock, it can be possible to do things on the ground that can improve people's lives. The very presence of international monitors can provide reassurance and protection of civilians. In Ukraine, the SMM was able to negotiate and monitor more than 6000 local ceasefires along the contact line that enabled critical repairs of gas, water, and electricity connections as well as infrastructure such as a key bridge in the town of Stanytsia Luhanska. This had a positive effect on the lives of people in the conflict zone. Female monitors, in particular, played a valuable role in reaching out to vulnerable members of the community and for building trust with the local populations. The SMM's more than seven years on the ground shows the importance of the international community being present and is a reminder that peace is not a prerequisite for helping those most affected.

Furthermore, it is vital to engage with the affected communities. Ukraine has a vibrant civil society. Communities that have lived through more than a decade of war should be regarded as agents for change, not just subjects for support.

¹⁰ <https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/drawing-line-swiss-army-knife-options-achieving-sustainable-ceasefire-ukraine>

¹¹ <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-07-2024-hunger-numbers-stubbornly-high-for-three-consecutive-years-as-global-crises-deepen--un-report>

More broadly, the people and not just their leaders need to be heard. That, after all, was one of the secrets of the success of the Helsinki process: people power to hold leaders accountable to the commitments that they had made. Where is the constituency for peace today?

Inspiration from anniversaries

In this year when we commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, it is worth recalling that the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act were both designed to foster security and cooperation, and to reduce the risk of conflict. While the geopolitical situation today is significantly different than it was in 1975 or 1945, the relevance of those foundational documents endures. What is needed, as called for by “Diplomats Without Borders”, is an “unbiased return to basics”¹²: to the spirit and the letter of the UN Charter. Furthermore, they call for institutional and attitudinal changes to render the UN more effective in the world of the 21st century.¹³ The same could be said for the OSCE. Steps should be taken to make the principles of the Helsinki Final Act more meaningful for present conditions so that they once again become the foundation for a peaceful order in Europe. Of course, the starting point is that all states fully respect and apply these principles in good faith under international law.

States and their leaders need to recognize that in a complex, interdependent world cooperation is self-interest¹⁴. Furthermore, the consequences of recent violations of international law should remind leaders and their peoples why principles such as those in the UN Charter and Helsinki Final Act were laid down in the first place: to ensure a degree of predictability, to prevent threats to peace, to settle disputes peacefully, to practice good-neighborly relations, and to promote social progress. Otherwise, we risk returning to an anarchic international system where might equals right, there are no rules, hegemony carve out spheres of influence, and civilians suffer.

In short, as was called for by the OSCE Panel of Experts more than a decade ago, we need to go “back to diplomacy”.¹⁵ Europe faces its biggest security challenge since the end of the Cold War. The old security order is changing. The Helsinki principles, which were the foundation for security and cooperation in Europe for half a century, need to be restored, renewed and revived. At the same time, the OSCE needs to adapt to be a key element of a new peace and security framework for Europe. A new security framework based on the foundation of existing principles and commitments can help states and peoples to deal more effectively with the crises of today and be better prepared for those of the future. This would be the most fitting tribute to the drafters of two documents that have been the keystones of European and international security during our lifetimes: the Helsinki Final Act and the United Nations Charter. And it would increase the chances of the peoples of the world and future generations to live in peace.

12 <https://www.diplomatswb.org/post/the-future-we-would-like-to-see?>

13 Ibid

14 Walter Kemp, *Security through Cooperation*, Routledge, London, 2022.

15 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/5/205846.pdf>

Is There Still a Place for Cooperative Security?

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Abstract

This article acknowledges that deterrence will likely be the dominant narrative and posture from both Russia and the West in the foreseeable future, but highlights the need for dialogue and cooperation to reduce risks and manage relations in an unstable security environment. It recalls how deterrence and *détente* were two pillars of security during the Cold War, and looks at how cooperative security can help to overcome the security dilemma currently faced by all sides. It also sketches out a possible process to discuss the future of European security.

Introduction

The OSCE is in crisis, paralysed by polarization, fallen off the political radar of main security stakeholders. There is little support or space for cooperative security. The main narrative and focus in the foreseeable future will be on deterrence, both from Russia and the West, particularly NATO countries. And yet, there could be a place for cooperative security, at least as part of managing relations between NATO and Russia, and in reducing the risk of the policy of deterrence deepening the security dilemma.

The forgotten pillar

European countries – wary of both Russia and the threat of Washington folding its security umbrella - are pouring billions of dollars into defence spending. The future of sovereign Ukraine depends on a credible deterrent. Russia continues to gear up its armed forces and war economy. Deterrence, deterrence, deterrence will no doubt be the mantra on both sides in the coming years.

Deterrence has long been a pillar of the security policies of NATO countries and Russia. However, in the past this was coupled with *détente*. After all, it was that spirit of *détente* that made it possible to launch the Helsinki Process in the early seventies and to finally agree on the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. It is worth recalling that *détente* was a central part of NATO doctrine. The Harmel report of 1967 says explicitly that “military security and a policy of *détente* are not contradictory but complementary”¹. Collective security through NATO was vital, but, as the report pointed out, “the way to peace and stability in Europe rests in particular on the use of the Alliance constructively in the interest of *détente*”.²

Times have changed. Russia still has to prove that it is again interested in peaceful coexistence with Ukraine. Moscow would argue that NATO enlargement undermines the idea of *détente* and the idea that European security is indivisible. Russia feels threatened by “Western expansion” and argues that “the West never tried to address security with Russia, only without it or against it”³. Meanwhile, the West argues that Moscow cannot be trusted, that its revisionist ambitions must be stopped, and that this requires strong defences and resolve, and enduring support for Ukraine. Deterrence is now the guiding principle on both sides. Russia, the West, and countries in-between are all caught in a security dilemma.

1 See « The Future Tasks of the Alliance » (Harmel report), NATO, 1967 , https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_26700.htm

2 Ibid.

3 See “the View from Moscow” in Back to Diplomacy, Final Report and Recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security as a Common Project p. 26,

The security dilemma is what happens when a state, in an effort to enhance its own security, is perceived as a threat by others. As a result, steps to enhance security by one state create greater instability within the wider security community. OSCE participating States tried to square this circle in the 1999 Istanbul document. On the one hand, OSCE heads of state or government reaffirmed “the inherent right of each and every participating State to be free to choose or change its security arrangements, including treaties of alliance, as they evolve”.⁴ At the same time, another sentence later in that same paragraph says that states “will not strengthen their security at the expense of the security of other States.” This is designed to overcome the security dilemma. Furthermore, it says that “no State, group of States or organization can have any pre-eminent responsibility for maintaining peace and stability in the OSCE area or can consider any part of the OSCE area as its sphere of influence.”⁵ The past twenty years have shown what happens when this dilemma is not resolved.

While overcoming the security dilemma of both Russia and the West will be very difficult, it needs to be addressed, and the OSCE is the logical place to do it. Therefore, in addition to de-escalating the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, putting in place a durable ceasefire and fair political settlement, attention needs to be focused on how to rebuild some degree of stability in Europe, if not cooperation. There is no need to reinvent the wheel; the key is to dust off neglected tools and commitments.

Restraint and risk reduction

There is arguably less mil-to-mil dialogue today than during the Cold War, and yet the risks of incidents and accidents along an almost 5000-kilometre zone of contact between NATO and Russia are very high. Lack of mil-to-mil dialogue increases the risk of miscommunication and unpredictability, as well as rapid and dangerous escalation.⁶ Since 2022, there have been several incidents between the militaries of Russia and NATO countries, and the chances of future frictions have increased with the large number of troops and weaponry in and around Ukraine, the positioning of Russian missiles in Belarus, as well as NATO enlargement to Sweden and Finland. Hybrid warfare can also heighten tensions and deepen suspicions, as seen by attacks on undersea cables, assassinations, cyber-attacks and sabotage.

The OSCE has a rich acquis of relevant documents to promote restraint, increase transparency, reduce risks and promote military contacts. These need to be revisited. In turn, more needs to be done to prevent and manage incidents and accidents in the air and at sea. It is telling that a last attempt to introduce OSCE guidelines on incident prevention and management on land, in the air and at sea was undertaken in the framework of the “Structured Dialogue”, a process launched by the German OSCE Chairpersonship at the Hamburg Ministerial at the end of 2016. By the end of 2018 it became clear that major powers – both NATO and Russia – had no interest in a tangible outcome of the process.

The sides may also seek to send signals to break the cycle of escalation, test ideas, and telegraph certain policies such as restraint or explaining force posture. As a result, some degree of cooperation will be necessary, even if it is to make deterrence more credible. “Confidence building” is probably a misnomer in the current security environment; de-escalation or transparency-increasing measures might be more accurate.

4 OSCE Istanbul Document 1999.

5 Ibid.

6 Thomas Greminger, “Why deterrence needs dialogue and détente”, GCSP Policy Brief no. 20, June 2025. <https://www.gcsp.ch/sites/default/files/2025-06/GCSP-Policy-Brief-20%20digital.pdf>

Whatever they are called, they are urgently needed. The alternative is a highly volatile situation between two heavily armed and nervous camps where any misstep or misread signal could trigger a rapid escalation even worse than the current war in Ukraine.

Such steps could open the way for discussing bigger issues of mutual interest such as strategic stability and arms control. Discussions will also need to be held on the impact of technology on warfare, including the use of drones, cyber-attacks, and hybrid warfare. Progress in these areas could open the possibility for dialogue between the United States and Russia on other issues of common interest including deconfliction in Syria, security in the Arctic and the Middle East, cooperation in outer space, and sharing intelligence related to terrorism.

Process design

If the political will is there, the challenge is to design an inclusive process to discuss the future of European security. Precedents include the open-ended series of dialogues on the future of European security launched in 1972 that resulted in the signing of the Helsinki Final Act more than two years later, the follow-up to the 1990 Charter of Paris that led to substantive decisions at the 1992 Helsinki Summit, or preparations for OSCE Summits, such as in Istanbul in 1999 or Astana in 2010. Agreement on almost anything will be difficult. But informal dialogue can at least start sketching the contours of possible issues to be discussed, and get participating States used to using the frameworks that have become rusty as a result of COVID and the war in Ukraine.

Finland could launch the process in the ‘Golden Jubilee’ year of the Helsinki Final Act. Switzerland, which will chair the OSCE in 2026, could be a motor for driving forward a more cooperative agenda. The ‘Structured Dialogue’, chaired by Norway, could be revived while Austria, as host country of the OSCE – and host of the Ministerial Council meeting in late 2025 – could be a catalyst for cooperation. There is no illusion that the political space for these kinds of initiatives will be defined by the evolution of attempts to end hostilities and move towards a political settlement in Ukraine. Still, there needs to be a political will to exploit the space available.

Ideas can be drawn from Track 2 initiatives, such as the one carried out by Geneva Center for Security Policy (GCSP) and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung that resulted in the production of “peace matrix”⁷. The dialogue, carried out over more than two years, brought together experts from Europe, the United States, Ukraine and Russia. The peace matrix shows how security and cooperation will have to be fostered on at least three levels: between the United States and Russia; Europe and Russia; and Ukraine and Russia. It also outlines four thematic areas to be addressed: de-escalation mechanisms; sovereignty of Ukraine; European security order; and global ecosystem. All of the potential steps that need to be taken cannot be taken at once. Rather, the tool is designed to help policymakers set priorities and initiate political consultations on how to rebuild cooperation and foster security in Europe. Both the process and outcomes should be as cooperative as possible.

7 Christos Katsioulis, Walter Kemp and Simon Weiß (February 2025, updated April 2025), “Conversations on European Security Peace Matrix”, https://peace.fes.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Projects/Conversations-on-European-Security_V2.pdf

What are the alternatives?

It is worth underlining that cooperative security is not a competitor to collective security, rather it is a compliment. For example, NATO countries that are part of the OSCE can coordinate their military strategies within the Alliance. At the same time, they can use the OSCE to talk to a wider group of countries across a more comprehensive range of security issues. Furthermore, judging by the current position of the US administration (among others), NATO enlargement in the next few years looks unlikely. Therefore, the OSCE remains an attractive place for countries that want a seat at the table in conversations that affect their national security and the security of Europe.

It is also worth keeping in mind that collective security organizations cannot be taken for granted in the current unpredictable geopolitical environment. Recent criticisms of NATO and the United Nations (not only from Washington) suggest that keeping open a variety of options would be prudent for countries with a stake in security and cooperation Europe.

Those who dismiss the need for cooperative security should outline the alternatives. Obviously, deterrence is one, indeed the most likely. But what could be the consequences of a deterrence-only policy? Years of an armed stand-off between Russia and the West at enormous political and economic cost? If there are to be discussions, at some point, on the future of European security, one would hope that Europeans, and not just Moscow and Washington, would be part of that conversation. As Finnish President Alexander Stubb warned at the Munich Security Conference in February 2025, we are facing a Yalta versus Helsinki moment: either a carve-up of Europe between the big powers, or a clear settling of how countries should behave towards each other based on commonly agreed principles. The latter conversations are not likely to happen in a revived NATO-Russia or in an EU-Russia forum, nor at the UN. By default, if not design, the last resort is the OSCE.

In December 2010 at the Astana Summit leaders of all 57 OSCE participating States recommitted themselves to the vision of a “free, democratic, common and indivisible Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security community stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok, rooted in agreed principles, shared commitments and common goals”. That vision has now become a grand illusion. The OSCE has become a conflict zone rather than a security community.

Ending the war in Ukraine and reducing tensions between Russia and the West will require imagination, leadership and political commitment at the level that we have not witnessed since 1990, 1975 or 1945. And the future of European security will require a degree of cooperation, not only deterrence. The anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act is a golden opportunity to reaffirm basic principles, to recall the usefulness of cooperative security, set down guardrails to manage relations between states, and to begin a process of rebuilding some degree of trust among countries with an interest in the future of European security.

Conclusion

To conclude, there is still a space for cooperative security. It is a small space, but one which needs to be used and stretched to the full, in the short-term in order to keep open channels of communication, reduce and manage risks, establish and stay within common guardrails, and, in the medium-to-long-term to work together towards a more peaceful and stable European security order.

Russia, The United States, and the OSCE: A Cloudy Future?

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Abstract

This article analyzes the role of the OSCE in U.S.-Russia relations from the 1970s to the present, and discusses how the OSCE might regain relevance and importance for European security in the future. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 capped almost two decades of deteriorating relations between Washington and Moscow and increasing discord and paralysis in the OSCE. The Helsinki Final Act and subsequent CSCE agreements were reached because both American and Soviet leaders pursued important goals that could be achieved best in a pan-European multilateral negotiation. After the end of the Cold War, the CSCE flourished during the 1990s, transforming into the OSCE. However, by the late 2000s U.S. and Russian views on the proper role of the OSCE diverged markedly, part of a growing disagreement over Europe's security architecture. While OSCE institutions remain in place, since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and began its war against Ukraine, there has been almost no consensus among the participating states. The article argues that, for the OSCE to have a future, its participating states must once again address important political and security issues there. With its existing institutions and universal membership, the OSCE could be a venue for negotiating important elements of a new political-security order in Europe. But for this to happen, participating states – especially the U.S. and Russia – must choose to do so.

Introduction

On August 1, 2025 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, more commonly known as the OSCE, celebrates fifty years from the signing in Helsinki, Finland of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The 1975 Helsinki Summit was attended by thirty-five European and North American heads of state or government, and was arguably the high point of East-West détente during the Cold War. The Final Act was the initial product of what became an ongoing process of multilateral negotiations on European security, the CSCE, and subsequently an international organization, the OSCE. The CSCE/OSCE played a crucial role in ending the Cold War and constructing the post-Cold War political-security order in Europe.

While all European states, along with the U.S. and Canada, were invited to participate in the CSCE, the Final Act and the “Helsinki process” that followed were in large part an initiative of the Soviet Union and the United States, aimed at improving and managing relations between the two superpowers. The Final Act was, in essence, a belated peace treaty ratifying European borders at the end of World War II; where the CSCE provided a framework for political and conventional arms control negotiations that ended the Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new OSCE became a key forum for US-Russian consultation, agreement on norms, and operational cooperation. Despite this record of achievement, not just the usefulness but the continued existence of the OSCE is currently widely questioned.

An Uneasy Anniversary

Over the past two decades, the OSCE has fallen upon hard times, as US-Russia relations have steadily deteriorated. In his infamous 2007 Munich speech Putin blasted the OSCE as biased, overly concerned with human rights and elections in Russia and its neighbors, and a de facto vehicle for American geopolitical ambition. Although Moscow continued to participate, it increasingly denounced the OSCE for its alleged failure to reflect Russian priorities and concerns. The 2013 Maidan protests in Ukraine, Russia's seizure of Crimea, and the war in Donbas blazed a firebreak in Russia's relations with the OSCE and the West in general.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought these relations to their lowest point since the depths of the Cold War.

As the OSCE/CSCE turns fifty, the very future of the Organization is in question, let alone whether it can help ameliorate and manage East-West relations. Given increasing Russian criticism and obstructionism since Putin's 2007 speech, the question naturally arises whether Moscow has any serious interest in the survival of the organization, let alone constructive participation in it. Meanwhile, in the U.S. the Trump administration has so far vacillated between indifferent skepticism and outright hostility toward international organizations and multilateral institutions. Russia's full-scale invasion and ongoing war against Ukraine contradict the very essence of the OSCE as a norms-based institution. There is little indication that either Moscow or Washington at this time consider the OSCE or its basic principles an effective guide for reaching and implementing a settlement of the war.

There are also structural obstacles to a significant future role for the OSCE in European security. The Cold War CSCE was divided into three camps: NATO (led by the U.S.), the Warsaw Pact (led by the USSR), and the Neutral and Non-Aligned (NNA) countries in which Sweden, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia were among the most active participants. NATO and the EU expanded following the collapse of the Soviet Union while the Warsaw Pact dissolved and the NNA as a bloc disappeared. Economic and security issues that were once substantively debated between the three major blocs in the CSCE are now often decided in the EU or NATO caucuses. The remaining participating states, among them the Russian Federation, are then presented with what often seem *faits accomplis*.

As such, the question remains: does the present-day OSCE have anything going for it beyond an illustrious history, and can it still play a constructive role in moderating or improving relations between the two largest participating states – the United States and the Russian Federation? The short answer is: it depends. A more nuanced reply points to the need first of all for a real desire on the part of the leaders of both states to bring relations out of the current deep freeze. If Moscow persists in pursuing expansive war aims in Ukraine, or if Washington and Allies preclude doing any business with Russia while the war continues, then the OSCE is likely at best to remain on life support.

Nonetheless, there are good reasons why the OSCE can and should survive and serve as a forum for resolving differences between the U.S. and Russia, particularly those on issues that affect all the states in the OSCE area. The OSCE is the only European security body that includes all the of the countries of the region and the two largest North American states. It has a well-established set of venues for comprehensive political and security dialogues. There are no institutional limits on the subjects that can be negotiated under the OSCE umbrella; the only restrictions are those imposed by the participating states themselves.

From Polemics to Consensus – and Back

History can serve as a guide to how the OSCE might be useful today. The CSCE/OSCE came into being because both the Soviet Union and the United States had vital interests in Europe which they came to believe could be ensured only through dialogue and agreement with the other.

Agreements on these issues could be reached and implemented only with the buy-in of other European states – hence the universal membership.¹ The Soviet Union set a high priority on gaining formal western recognition of the state borders established in Europe at the end of World War II. The U.S. desired to relax political tensions, reduce obstacles to contacts and communication, and promote civic and political rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in the states in the Soviet bloc. Both sides wished to lower the level of conventional military confrontation in Europe and reduce fears of surprise attack. The result – the Final Act – was a package deal that included much, but not all of what Moscow and Washington wanted.

The Final Act contained a provision for follow-up, as both the USSR and the U.S. desired to manage the relationship and pursue through negotiation those aims which had not been achieved at the 1975 Helsinki Summit. The first decade of the Helsinki process was rocky, marked by sharp disagreements, in particular over western criticism of human rights abuses in the Soviet bloc, and interrupted for an extended period after the declaration of martial law in Poland in December 1981. Progress, if any, was grudging and incremental.

Things changed after Gorbachev came to power in 1985. In the 1986 Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe (CDE), Soviet representatives for the first time accepted the principle of on-site inspection.² This satisfied a longstanding U.S. demand and enabled rapid negotiation of a string of major arms control agreements, including the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) reached by twenty-three participating states “within the context” of the CSCE. The Charter of Paris, signed at the same summit as the Conventional Armed Force in Europe (CFE) Treaty, formalized the end of the Cold War and the forty-year division of Europe.

The Paris Charter contained far-reaching, unequivocal commitments to basic principles of security, individual rights, fundamental freedoms, rule of law, and democracy. The document also established institutions which in four years transformed the CSCE into an organization, the OSCE. The 1990s were a decade of remarkable cooperation between the U.S. and Russia (as the formal successor to the Soviet Union). The OSCE engaged in conflict prevention, conflict mediation and resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, in large part through a set of nearly twenty field missions in at least seventeen different participating states. Discussions in the OSCE’s Vienna headquarters led to the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty and the Charter for European Security, which aimed to provide a comprehensive framework for management of cooperative security in Europe.

However, this elaborate framework was never really put to use. While Russia sought to make the OSCE the major venue for managing European security, the U.S. and its chief European allies expanded both the EU and NATO.³ While the architects of these policies in Washington and Brussels did not necessarily intend to sideline the OSCE and diminish Russia’s role, in the end that is what happened. NATO’s attack on Milosevic’s

1 Only Enver Hoxha’s Albania declined the invitation to the original CSCE; Albania later joined in 1990. The participation of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) under President Slobodan Milosevic was suspended in 1992, but was restored after Milosevic’s removal.

2 See the interview of Ambassador Robert L. Barry on the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs History Project website, www.adst.org; also former Prime Minister Yevgeniy Primakov to author, June, 2000; also Oleg Grinevsky and Lynn M. Hansen, *Making Peace: Confidence and Security in a New Europe* (New York, 2009).

3 Gorbachev raised the prospect of the CSCE as the primary security forum in Europe during the December 1991 summit with George H.W. Bush in Malta. This idea was also a major Russian objective at the 1994 Budapest summit. For these and other examples, see William H. Hill, *No Place for Russia: European Security Institutions since 1989* (New York, 2018) especially p. 100, pp.154-155, and p. 417, note 120.

Yugoslavia, immediately after its first expansion, hardened Russian suspicions. Despite many positive moves and developments after 2000, Moscow increasingly perceived western actions in the OSCE as aimed at criticizing or weakening Russia. Putin's 2007 diatribe in Munich reflected widespread sentiment in Russian political and intellectual elites that the U.S., NATO, and the EU aimed to push Russia out of what it saw as its European space, and perhaps even to effect regime change in Russia.

Dialogue between Moscow and Washington, both within and outside the OSCE, deteriorated steadily after the 2010 Astana Summit, and especially after Putin's 2012 return to the presidency. The U.S. used the Permanent Council and OSCE Ministerial meeting largely to criticize Russia, especially for its actions in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, and elsewhere on the former Soviet periphery. The Vienna Document (VDOC), the most fundamental military security agreement in the OSCE acquis, has not been updated since 2011. U.S.-Russia cooperation within the Minsk Group, a welcome exception to the norm, effectively ended with Azerbaijan's victory in the war against Armenia in 2020. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, dialogue in the Permanent Council in Vienna has been little more than vituperative accusations and denunciations.

From the Old Order to the New

Notwithstanding the deep divisions among them, all of the participating states remain in the OSCE and in Vienna. The Organization is still there and does not need to be recreated. What needs to be created is a desire on the part of Russia, the U.S., Ukraine, and the other participating states to begin and participate in a dialogue on how to provide for security and stability in Europe after the war in Ukraine is ended. It is mostly up to Moscow and Kyiv to determine what terms will enable them to stop fighting. However, all of the OSCE participating states have an interest in how the peace in Europe can be maintained after the conflict.

Agreements between Russia, the United States, and Europe, in addition to whatever Ukraine and Russia decide, will be needed for a stable peace. Even if a settlement limits weapons and deployments inside Ukraine, there are a host of broader regional military and security issues that need to be resolved. Since the 1999 ACFE and 2011 VDOC were adopted, there have been tremendous advances in conventional weaponry, such as longer-range rocket artillery, improved combat aircraft, and autonomous aerial and naval surveillance and attack vehicles. Drones and cyber can be used for sabotage as well as kinetic operations. The end of the INF Treaty, combined with development of increasingly accurate ballistic missiles of all ranges, has brought back to Europe an old threat in much more sophisticated form.

These issues need to be discussed by Russia, the U.S., NATO, and other participating states, since at least some of these capabilities can be developed, produced, and deployed by many smaller states, not just major powers. These discussions at some point will need to address possible parameters for locations and size of Russian and western military deployments, and how transparency might be ensured and confidence built against the fear of surprise attack. In providing for future military security and stability, the states of Europe and North America face a choice of what will follow the war in Ukraine. They can continue to produce more weapons, develop new ones, conscript more troops, and deploy them continuously to counter existing, emerging, and future threats. Such a course is likely at best to produce an ongoing security dilemma between Russia on the one hand and the U.S. and its allies on the other, or at worst an accident and a major war. Or the leaders of these states can chart a course similar to that of their predecessors in the early 1970s.

The states of Europe and North America, the U.S. and Russia are not back in the same place they were in 1973, when the CSCE negotiations began in Geneva. Borders have been re-drawn, new states emerged, political allegiances shifted, and scientific and technical advances have made weapons of war far more formidable. Fifty years of history, not all of it peaceful or pleasant, has created new fears, suspicions, and resentments. Nonetheless, for a historian and former participant in the Cold War Helsinki process, the fundamental issues and choices seem very familiar. Will we pursue the chimera of impregnable military superiority, or will we seek to reduce the level of confrontation, increase confidence, and thus reduce the fear of surprise? Will we seek areas of pragmatic common agreement even with those with whom we differ vehemently over norms of political, social, and economic organization? And can we be confident those interlocutors with whom we so deeply disagree will act the same with us?

Ultimately leaders in Moscow, Washington, and other European capitals need to decide which is the greater threat: continue on the present course with the war in Ukraine, in which each side hopes that the other side and its supporters will collapse first, while risking expansion of the conflict; OR engage in negotiations that involve significant concessions to the other side, with the risk this will be perceived by the other party or other states as a reward and encourage further instances of similar behavior.

Guidelines and certainties from the past few decades are of limited use in making this choice. The post-Cold War order, indeed the post-World War II European order is over, and the basic outlines and rules of the new order need to be agreed. Russia, the U.S., their Allies and partners can start negotiating the terms of this new order now, or they can let the fighting go on in the hope of getting a better deal at some uncertain future date.

What Can Be Done?

There is much that can be done in the OSCE to address the US-Russia relationship and how it affects broader European security. For that to happen, the fighting in Ukraine has to stop, and it is not at all clear how soon that might happen. As the party that initiated the conflict, Russia is far from achieving its initial objectives. At the same time, Ukraine has lost too much territory, blood, and treasure to easily accept an agreement that simply freezes things where they are. Pressure from the Trump administration has forced Moscow and Kyiv to begin talks, but it is uncertain whether it will have the necessary staying power. Strong support for Ukraine from Europe may make it easier for Ukraine to get an acceptable end to the fighting, but then harder to work out longer-term security arrangements with Russia.

Should the war in Ukraine come to some sort of end, and the participating states choose to use the OSCE as a venue to discuss a new security order, there will be some major differences from the initial 1973 negotiations in Geneva. Unlike 1973, the OSCE already has fifty years' worth of agreed principles and norms. Yet the second largest participating state is in clear, blatant violation of the most basic of those principles. At the same time, Foreign Minister Lavrov uses the principle of equal security to berate the West for its support of Ukraine and NATO expansion.

For any practical horse-trading in the OSCE to work, the participating states will need to acknowledge their deep divisions over principles and not allow these differences to block discussions and agreements on other subjects. In this sense, almost any real negotiations that occur in the OSCE today will resemble those in the Helsinki process between 1973 and 1989, which were marked by vituperative polemics, frequent disruptions,

and slow, episodic progress. Criticism for alleged violations must still be allowed and accepted, but should not be an insuperable impediment to a search for areas of agreement. Participating states will need to accept the new reality. Normative commitments and institutions of the OSCE will remain, but there will also be greater discord over failure to observe norms, and less operational activity in these institutions. If any of this is a deal-breaker, especially for the U.S. or Russia, the OSCE will remain sidelined.

Military security negotiations should take precedence. There is a dire need to restore some semblance of transparency, information exchange, confidence building, and risk reduction, in particular along the long border between Russia and NATO. Although Russia may reasonably expect that its legitimate military security concerns will be addressed, it should not and cannot exclude discussion of subjects it does not like, which include a broad spectrum in the human dimension.

The negotiation of the original CFE Treaty can serve as a rough model for Russia-US and Russia-NATO conventional arms and security negotiations. The original CFE talks included only the twenty-three members of the Warsaw Pact and NATO, but were conducted under the overall aegis of the CSCE, with periodic reports to the other participating states. The rationale was that the results concerned all the European states, even if they were not directly involved, and some of the norms agreed might be more broadly applicable. This approach was continued with the Adapted CFE Treaty.

The OSCE can be rejuvenated if the participating states agree to use it as a venue to seek meaningful agreements on important subjects. While the initial priority should be on updates to agreements and norms for conventional military security, eventually the participating states will need to face the far more vexing political questions raised by Russia's war against Ukraine: are there circumstances in which the forcible change of state borders is acceptable?; is this just a violation of the Helsinki decalogue that we choose to ignore?; and, if so, are there other principles whose observance is optional?

There is no point in the fifty-year history of the OSCE at which observance of OSCE norms, including the ten principles of the Final Act, has been perfect. Even the broad consensus of 1990, which produced the Paris Charter, was not as broad, deep, or lasting as many of the participants at the time hoped. OSCE commitments and norms have always been ideals and aspirations, not realities.

In the end, for the OSCE to survive and serve to moderate US and European relations with Russia, it must not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. The 1990 Paris and 1999 Istanbul summits were high points, but not the end of history. OSCE achievements include helping end the Cold War and ensuring over forty years without major war in Europe. Russia's current war in Ukraine is a failure, but also not the end of history. A pan-European forum will almost certainly be needed to help provide for the next forty years of peace. Why not a revitalized OSCE?

Prevention is Not Very Sexy: A Conversation with Knut Vollebaek

Knut Vollebaek in conversation with Walter Kemp

Knut Vollebaek was Foreign Minister when Norway chaired the OSCE in 1999, he was a leading member of the Panel of Experts on OSCE reform in 2004/5 and was High Commissioner on National Minorities from 2007 to 2010. In this interview, he reflects on these roles as well as topics including quiet diplomacy, reform of the European security order, and the possibility of Norway chairing the OSCE again in the future.

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Q: As High Commissioner on National Minorities you were engaged in quiet diplomacy. That also used to be a general characteristic of the OSCE. But now in the Permanent Council there is a lot of public diplomacy, reading out of speeches, point scoring, and use of social media. Do you think there is still a place for quiet diplomacy in the OSCE and elsewhere?

KV: I hope there is a place for quiet diplomacy because I think it is very useful. My experience, particularly as High Commissioner on National Minorities, is, however, that it works best in conjunction with public diplomacy. Quiet diplomacy may give reason for not doing anything. When I could work together with heads of other OSCE institutions, particularly ODIHR and Representative of Freedom of the Media, it worked well. Also working with countries seeking to join the European Union quiet diplomacy provided a channel for honest assessments, for example of draft legislation, without having to reveal publicly any sort of criticism, and then these governments could take that advice and present it almost as their own. In this way, they could achieve something that they wanted on the road to EU accession, or in bilateral relations. It was a kind of carrot. But today it seems the carrots are gone. There is less interest or incentives for cooperation, not least because the EU accession process seems to have stalled. We need to go back and look at the conflict prevention idea, explaining and showcasing to countries that quiet diplomacy can actually reduce tensions both domestically and in inter-state conflicts.

Q: Finger-pointing is becoming more prevalent in international relations. And instead of speaking softly and carrying a big stick, some countries seem to be wielding sticks instead of providing carrots. Forget about quiet diplomacy for a moment; what is the place for diplomacy at all in a transactional international system?

KV: In the past, when you look back at the Helsinki process 50 years ago, both the East and the West perceived that there were benefits for taking part in the CSCE process and abiding by the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The West had its priorities, such as the human dimension, while the East had its interests, such as arms control. The process was perceived as a win-win. Today it seems like the mentality is win-lose. If you win, I lose and vice versa. I think this is fundamentally wrong in diplomacy and international politics. In the past, it has been shown that there can be negotiations to the benefit of all parties, such as the creation of international organizations or even in bilateral diplomacy. I think this winner-takes-all mentality can be attributed in part to certain personalities in power today, but also to the loss of trust or confidence in globalization. For many years, we had a globalization where many people saw benefits. Now many people have experienced globalization as a loss. They are losing jobs. They are losing their cultural environment. Some people feel globalization causes insecurity. Governments and authorities have not taken these social challenges seriously enough. Maybe because of that, international diplomacy has lost credibility in the eyes of the electorate. This has an impact on politicians. They seem to think that to reassure their people they need to use loud voices instead of quiet diplomacy. Politicians even create antagonism in order to win short term electoral victories

Q; Do you think that the loss of confidence associated with globalization has also contributed to the rise of populism

KV: Perhaps, it also contributes to a lack of trust in international institutions. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. As leaders came out of the end of that war, they were keen to create institutions that would avoid a repetition of that disaster. Today, the generation that experienced the Second World War is gone. The new generations have no living memory of a major war in Europe. They

do not think the same way about the consequences of conflict as the post-World War II generation did. Or think back to the early 1990s, to the period that created a number of innovative institutions such as the High Commissioner on National Minorities. This was partly a response to the terrible wars in the former Yugoslavia. Foreign ministers wanted to avoid any further such conflicts. But that was more than thirty years ago. Now, some politicians are letting identity politics flourish and using it for short-term political gains. As I already mentioned, politicians are using this to create enemies and support for themselves.

Q: It is the 80th anniversary of the UN and the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. The world is different now. The last three times there were major reforms of the international system – in 1815, 1919 and 1945 – it was always after a war. There is war raging in Ukraine today. Do you anticipate a reform of the European security order after this war?

KV: It is not obvious, and maybe the situation is not felt as dramatic enough outside of Ukraine. If you look at the world today, leaders should be taking the situation so seriously that they would say “let’s sit down, let’s do something”, but they are not. Maybe it is because the current conflicts in the world do not have a major impact on great powers or their electorate to the extent that wars did in the past, outside of the countries at war. In 1945, there was a political environment, a desire to get out of the situation, to rebuild, and you had political leaders who wanted to escape the legacy of two world wars – who wanted to rebuild Europe in a way that people (not least in Germany) would have a sense of ownership to their societies. The U.S. saw an interest in helping to rebuild Europe. It was a great help to a Europe in ruins, but it was also helping the U.S. – both by stabilizing Europe, creating a buffer against a possibly expansionist Soviet Union and creating foundations for a vibrant economy that would benefit the populations both in Western Europe and the U.S.. These were serious measures of prevention. Now, prevention is not very sexy. Politicians have become more reactive than proactive. There has to be a big crisis for politicians to react decisively, but by then it is often too late.

Q: OK, but we have a big crisis in Ukraine. How much more urgent can this get?

KV: No doubt the war in Ukraine is very serious. It has created some uncertainty among the population in Europe. However, the reaction varies from country to country, and seems to depend on the geographical distance to Russia. Russia’s attack on Ukraine has not been perceived by many as a threat to Europe as such. However, President Trump’s indication that the U.S. may not be as ready to defend Europe as before, has certainly drawn European countries closer together. At the same time economic and energy interests certainly play a strong role in determining foreign policy of European countries towards Russia. For some countries (or at least politicians), short-term interests seem to outweigh bigger more abstract questions of European security.

Q: Then what is left of the Helsinki principles?

KV: The principles are still valid. As it said in one of the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons reports, the fact that cars violate traffic signals does not mean that you change the rules of the road. At the same time, there needs to be a political will to hold countries accountable to those principles. As a result of the Second World War, many good instruments to solve conflicts and avoid wars were established. They are available. What worries me greatly, however, is that they are not being used. These instruments and organizations need to be used to create a more “ruly” world. We need to get politicians to understand that.

Q: If steps are successful to de-escalate the conflict in Ukraine, you would also need a discussion on the future of European security. By default, that could fall to the OSCE. Some people say that the greatest days of the OSCE are in front of it. Do you think that despite the current crisis there could be a pendulum swing back towards managing relations more predictably and peacefully through the OSCE, or something else?

KV: I hope that's true. I think the OSCE is a very valid and useful instrument, where all countries of Europe come together and all countries have an equal voice because of the consensus rule. I think that's very important. But then also Western countries have to be more willing to use the OSCE. For example, when it comes to disarmament, the United States has tended towards making bilateral deals, often using the excuse that organizations like the OSCE are cumbersome. Yes, such organizations can be cumbersome, but they are important for having a comprehensive agreement. The fact that it is so hard to convince countries to chair the OSCE shows the lack of enthusiasm and support for the organization and willingness to engage with it.

Q: What about Norway chairing the OSCE?

KV: I have told the government that they should. They almost did it a few years ago, but then changed their mind. I think it is very unfortunate if Norway doesn't chair again. Hopefully politicians may see its value. Finland has stepped up and is doing a good job. We should too. Governments need to realize that the OSCE is a useful instrument, but they do not have a recent good experience of the organization and are paying insufficient attention to the OSCE.

Q: Last time that Norway chaired the OSCE, in 1999, the Kosovo Verification Mission was deployed at short notice. Fifteen years later, in 2014, the OSCE was called upon to deploy a Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. Can you imagine the deployment of an OSCE or OSCE/UN monitoring mission to Ukraine?

KV: I don't think that's impossible, and I think there are very few other European security organizations that could be deployed. I think deploying a monitoring force to Ukraine will be challenging, but I believe it will be less controversial for Russia if it is an OSCE mission than an EU or NATO or Western coalition of the willing. However, this boils down to political will. Russia is part of the OSCE, OSCE decisions are based on consensus and for the time being it does not seem that Russia is interested in a peace deal.

Q: You were a leading member of the Panel of Eminent Persons in 2004/05. The Panel's report, called Common Purpose, included a number of recommendations such as thematic missions and a Statute or Charter for the OSCE. Twenty years later do you think those recommendations are still valid?

KV: From the perspective of prevention, I do believe that thematic missions could serve an important purpose. It would probably be perceived as less controversial than interference in an ongoing conflict, thus, it might be possible to obtain a consensus. Such missions could definitely be part of quiet diplomacy. I would even claim that the work of the OSCE HCNM at times is a sort of thematic mission addressing specific issues aiming at preventing conflicts. However, this means that the participating States have to give priority to prevention.

I still believe that a Charter or a legally binding statute could be useful for the OSCE. However, the situation today is very different from what it was in 2005 when we presented the report by the then Group of Eminent Persons. Again this has to do with political will. In today's polarised world, I think it would be a futile exercise to start a process of creating a Charter or developing a legally binding statute for the organization. If there

is a will there are already instruments available for prevention and conflict resolution. It is also important to remember that the three autonomous institutions of the OSCE, ODIHR, HCNM and RofFM, do not require consensus or decisions by the Permanent Council to engage in its activities. They are the great asset of the OSCE and should be used to their fullest in a situation when consensus is difficult to obtain.



The Charter of Paris in Perspective

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Abstract

Initiated by the Soviet Union, the negotiations among the 35 signatories of the Helsinki Final Act led to the adoption of the Charter of Paris in November of 1990, in the context of multiple negotiations across greater Europe. It asserts that the era of confrontation and division in Europe has ended, based on an ambitious set of principles grounded in human values and in multidimensional cooperation in the fields of security, economics and relationships with other regions. It represents both a conclusion of the cold war period in Europe and the start of a complex period of building a new set of cooperative arrangements across the continent, including the strengthening of the CSCE.

***“The era of confrontation and division of Europe has ended”
Charter of Paris, Paragraph 1.***

The dynamic developments in international politics in 2025 recall in some ways the exceptional turmoil that reigned in 1990. It was one of those years where, after a period of slow developments on the world scene, momentous events rapidly overlapped with each other: the fragmentation of the eastern bloc, the reunification of Germany, the reconsideration of the European security order, rumblings in Yugoslavia, the occupation of Kuwait by Iraq. The succession of events fully mobilised leaders, whose frequent and intense interaction resulted in some remarkably positive and successful achievements.

In that year of turmoil and sustained diplomatic activity, there emerged a thread of constructive collective endeavour: the preparation of an ambitious package of commitments and principles setting the framework for a new Europe among the 35 states that had participated in the Helsinki process. It led to three interconnected and complementary texts, all adopted in Paris over the course of a few days in November of that year: the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE), the Joint Declaration of Twenty-Two States and the Charter of Paris. The Charter stands out as the most comprehensive and ambitious of the three, while reflecting the uncertainties and momentum of the times. Together, these three documents represent outstanding milestones for peace and stability on the European continent. Resulting from an exceptional convergence among the states party to the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), they reconfigured greater Europe and opened the way for further dramatic changes.

Although contemporary circumstances are different from those that prevailed in 1990, and the leadership across the 57 members of what is now the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) differs from that of their predecessors, there are lessons that can be drawn from that extraordinary period for current developments across greater Europe.

When on November 29, 1989, in Rome Mikhail Gorbachev proposed to hold “A summit of the States that signed the Helsinki accord, some time in 1990”¹, he presided over a still-intact Soviet Union and was seeking to manage the consequences of the fall of the Berlin wall that he had consented to weeks before. He relied on the proposals he had previously made for a common European house, and probably had in mind the possibility of setting up a full pan-European security organisation to replace both the existing military alliances on the continent, NATO and the Warsaw Pact. He envisaged that the CSCE could provide a structure to accommodate the two Germanies, whose fate remained to be determined following the initial ten-point plan put forward

1 Le Monde, 2 décembre 1989.

shortly before by Chancellor Kohl.

A few days later, at a meeting with French President Mitterrand in Kiev, Gorbachev convinced him that a “Helsinki II” meeting could be a key step in dealing with the transformations underway in Europe. Such a meeting may well have suited the interests of both leaders, giving time to prepare for the transition in Germany and providing an option for the forthcoming restructuring of the relationship between the Warsaw Pact and NATO. Thereafter, the process that led rapidly to the Paris meeting was driven by both leaders and served as an important (but not unique) component in an intense set of negotiations that took place over the following year, involving all the stakeholders in pan-European security.

The proposal for a CSCE summit reflected the common apprehensions of the Soviets and the French regarding the future of Germany, as well as their shared desire to create an inclusive, pan-European, stabilising framework to manage the transition towards a new set of peaceful relationships on the continent that would preserve their respective interests. For the French, this approach was combined with a strong desire to strengthen the European Community (EC) as a complement to the evolution of the German situation and with Mitterrand’s own vision of a European confederation, outlined in his end-of-year address in December 1989. The approach also reflected the desire in French diplomatic circles to play an active role in shaping the major transformations happening in Europe, and so avoid a Yalta-like situation with major decisions made by only a few actors.

At the Ottawa meeting on Open Skies in February 1990, the EC pressed for a CSCE meeting to be set for the end of the year. The US and the Federal Republic of Germany did not want the CSCE to be the format in which the question of the future of the Germanies would be addressed, and thus this task was given to the two plus four negotiations, between the representatives of the two German states and the four allied powers. The US, whose priority was the finalisation of the CFE treaty negotiations, was initially reluctant to agree to a “Helsinki II”, but consented after Secretary of State James Baker obtained from his Soviet counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze, an equal ceiling for US and Soviet forces in the central area covered by the CFE negotiations. The decision to hold a November summit in Paris was taken by the 35 participating states at a CSCE meeting in Copenhagen on June 5, 1990, and it provided for a preparatory committee to meet in Vienna on very short notice.

Negotiators were encouraged to focus on the question of the future of Europe and the deepening of CSCE commitments and norms. Talks addressed the follow-up to the Helsinki process and set the stage for broad and open exchanges, with the Soviet Union playing a positive and willing role. With the German question set in the two plus four talks, the context of the discussions evolved very quickly and positively. The Vienna-based negotiations on CFE and confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) underway respectively in formats of 22 and 35 participating states gathered momentum and were ready for a simultaneous adoption by the fall.

The task of preparing the substance for the Summit fell on the delegations of the 35 participating states already present in Vienna to work on CSBMs. They were given a broad mandate and fairly free rein. Delegations were reinforced by diplomatic high flyers sent from capitals such as Pierre Morel, John Maresca, Antonio Armellini, Brian Crowe and Yuri Deriabin, who set to work intensely given the short time-frame available. Debates took a creative turn, involving discussions on the principles which should inspire the 35 participating states in a context where, for once, each state could voice its views freely. The preparatory committee held only two sessions under time pressure, since the outcome of the Summit to come had to be shaped in a few

months and not over two years, as had been the case for the 1975 Helsinki meeting. Negotiations were spurred on by the acceleration of the process of German unification throughout the year and may have accelerated it in return. On a parallel track, in a different hall of the Hofburg palace, a statement amounting to a non-aggression declaration prepared by NATO was being negotiated among the twenty-two member states of the two military alliances in the context of the CFE treaty negotiations.

The work of the Preparatory Committee over five months proved exceptionally fruitful. The Soviet delegation demonstrated a remarkable flexibility and openness to dialogue.² Italy presided the European Community and provided most of the drafts. It found itself occasionally at odds with the US delegation which benefitted from a great leeway from Washington and thought to preserve the central role of NATO in European security.³ France, as host for the summit to come, sought to combine its expectations for the summit with the proposal put forward by President Mitterrand of a “Confederation” of European states which would have complemented the CSCE.⁴ Members from the neutral and non-aligned states served as coordinators of three working groups. A meeting of the 34 foreign Ministers, held in New York on 01 and 02 October, allowed for a first consolidation of the drafts and of the Joint Declaration of the Twenty two States which was essential for of the United States and the Soviet Union since it formally ended the second World War among all the states that had participated in it.

The resulting text, entitled “Charter for a New Europe” at the suggestion of Germany, was unusual in its structure and in its ambitious content. It opened with a solemn set of proclamations centred on human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It followed with a chapter on friendly relations among nations which outlined the modalities of conflict resolution expected among the 35 states and new perceptions regarding their security. It included an explicit endorsement of the Treaty of Moscow signed on September 12, 1990, formally ending the Second World War, and celebrated the unification of Germany that came into effect on October 3, 1990. It recognized the role of North American states in the CSCE.

A second part of the text regarding future orientations covered eight separate themes reflecting specific concerns: the human dimension (including national minorities, an issue strongly supported by the central and eastern European countries and by Germany), further discussions on CSBMs and disarmament (to be held at 34 thus ending the exclusive dialogue between the two military alliances), economic cooperation based on market economy principles and focused on the transition of the formerly socialist economies, protection of the environment, cultural exchanges, migrant workers, the Mediterranean dimension and non-governmental organisations. The Helsinki baskets were thus extended and enriched, and the CSCE began to work in new domains.

A third part of the Charter laid the groundwork for a set of permanent structures and institutions to guide the CSCE process. It represented a compromise between those States that desired a full institutionalisation of the process (chiefly Germany and the Soviet Union) and those that were inclined towards loose consultative arrangements (like the US and France). The retained structure established a permanent system of consultations through a committee of senior officials to prepare the annual meetings of the Council of Ministers. These meetings were to be supported by a CSCE Secretariat and chaired by the member state

2 Antonio Armellini, *L'Italia e la Carta di Parigi per una nuova Europa*, Editoriale Scientifica, Napoli, 2022.

3 John J. Maresca, *The unknown Peace Agreement*, Ibidem Verlag, Stuttgart, 2022.

4 *Reconstruire l'Europe apres Yalta*, La Charte de Paris, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, 2020.

hosting the Council. Follow-up meetings of the CSCE were expected to take place every two years to review the implementation of CSCE commitments. A Conflict Prevention Center was established to follow the military aspect of the process via a Consultative Committee, as well as an Office for Free Elections dedicated to facilitate contacts on elections. It was decided that a Summit meeting would take place in 1992 in Helsinki. A detailed supplementary document provided for procedural and organizational modalities of these arrangements.

The Summit in Paris on November 19-20, benefitted from the presence of all the heads of government of the 34 (following the unification of Germany)and turned out to have a strong symbolic and emotional value beyond the ceremonial event of speeches and signature. It was immediately preceded on November 18 by the signature of the CFE Treaty which sought a balanced and comprehensive reduction of the conventional weapons present on the European Continent. The declaration of 22 States was signed immediately after the CFE Treaty . These successive meetings, documents and the Charter set the stage for a Europe whole and free, endorsed at the highest level, sharing a number of fundamental principles and values and a determination to implement them jointly.

With the benefit of 30 years' hindsight, one is tempted to identify two separate strands in this remarkable construction. One part of the project aimed to consolidate the existing order by updating and formalising some of its key components, while the other laid the foundations and ambitions for a new order and a bold continental project.

The Charter of Paris explicitly referred to the Ten Principles of the Helsinki Final Act and was signed by Gorbachev on behalf of a Soviet Union that still deployed considerable military forces across central and eastern Europe. It established a set of arrangements which can be perceived as a form of the pan-European security that Soviet diplomacy promoted for decades and it makes no mention of NATO. It has been claimed that Gorbachev intended the CSCE process to help him domestically, reinforcing his authority over the whole of the Soviet Union, at a time when nationalist elements were asserting themselves both in the Baltic Republics of the Soviet Union and in its Russian component. If this was the aim of the Kremlin, one cannot help but recognize that things did not work as intended, since the process of disintegration of the Soviet Union gained momentum over the course of 1990. Representatives of the Baltic republics were discreetly allowed to be present on the sidelines of the Paris meeting.

The innovations and forward-looking dimensions of the Charter appear to be more significant. The Charter asserts that Europe is free and whole on four different occasions. Beyond endorsing German unity, it stresses the cultural identity of Europe and suggests that the CSCE had a world-wide dimension, open to other states and supportive of the role of the United Nations. The transatlantic link is described as grounded in shared values. The human dimension of the CSCE is a recurring theme of the introductory part of the Charter and the lead guideline, introducing the issues of national minorities and free movement of persons and ideas. The new Europe is described as democratic, peaceful, and united.⁵ The next CSCE meeting was scheduled to take place in Moscow drawing on the advice of a committee of wise persons to advance the human rights mechanism. The Charter recognizes the Council of Europe as an important partner in this field, a significant break from previous Soviet reluctance towards this institution. A parliamentary dimension is envisaged for the CSCE.

5 Victor-Yves Ghebali, La Charte de Paris pour une nouvelle Europe, Revue Defense Nationale , Paris, 1991.

Similar dynamics for the future drive the security guidelines with the indication that future negotiations in this field would be held at 34 and cautious wording regarding dispute resolution which stresses the potential of mechanisms in conformity with international law. Last-minute Swiss and French efforts to introduce a court of conciliation and arbitration failed. The Charter opens the way for further security arrangements which would consolidate the status of the newly united Germany in NATO and address the status of the states of central and eastern Europe.

In spite of its limited toolbox, the guidelines on the economic dimension are notable in their assertion of the role of cooperation based on market economy. The concern of the central and eastern European states that they would be left behind economically had been a significant matter of discussion in the talks. The issue of energy was discussed at the preparatory stage extensively but failed to retain the attention of leaders.

The intensification of the consultative machinery and the setting up of limited secretariat capabilities were important steps forward in a context where several crises were looming on the horizon, particularly in Yugoslavia. The CSCE gained credentials as an organisation-in-waiting but the state in charge of the Council of Ministers retained a key role in case of crisis.

The remarkable achievements of the process that led to the Paris Charter clearly owed a great deal to the goodwill of the Gorbachev administration in retaining many of the proposals put forward by NATO at the London meeting of 06 July 1990. But they also embody a genuine example of collective thinking and give and take among the 35. In many ways, the Paris Charter represents the real end of the Second World War through the adoption of a shared perspective of cooperation and peace by the European and North American states who fought it. It struck a delicate balance among the different participants, accommodating the concerns clearly voiced in the context of the summit debate. As a peace package ending a major conflict, the Charter was milder and more consensual than the Versailles Treaty in 1919. The Paris meeting turned out to be the high point of the pan-European process, soon thereafter marred by the Yugoslav wars and the multiple conflicts at the periphery of the Soviet space.

The Charter was conceived to provide an orderly and progressive transition to a new framework in Europe, allowing States to choose their security arrangements while providing them with a shared safety net of stability, cooperation and security. However, events evolved much faster than expected, undercutting this balanced evolutionary perspective and fueling problems for the future.

The Charter of Paris thus did not live up to its potential as a lasting tool for peace. It was meant to anchor all the components of the Soviet Union in a peaceful European space but ultimately Russia, the main successor state, came to consider it flawed. This is regrettable but understandable; a peace package is extremely difficult to conceive and implement after a prolonged and deeply destabilising conflict.

Each historic situation has its own characteristics, but the opportunity at Paris to find compromises and innovative solutions through intense dialogue and compromise based on common values was unique. The culture and the toolbox of the OSCE, forged at the Paris and Helsinki 1992 summits and honed in the following three decades through thick and thin, remain a unique acquis, still at the disposal of states to help address the



Section 2: Human Rights

Security and Human Rights Journal

Special Edition: The OSCE at 50

The Impact of the Helsinki Accords on Civil Society Development and Human Rights Observance in the OSCE Region: Past and Present

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Introduction

On December 4th, 2024, during the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, the Malta Declaration was adopted: “A stronger and reformed OSCE is needed to ensure its ability to implement its mission and effectively respond to the crisis threatening our comprehensive security”¹. The conference was organised by the Civic Solidarity Platform, established in 2011, which represents a network of more than 100 CSOs from across the OSCE region working on human rights, peacebuilding and democracy promotion.

The Declaration highlighted that “the future of the OSCE appears uncertain at a time when, more than ever in the past 50 years, our region faces multiple crises. There is an urgent need to strengthen and reform the OSCE to ensure that it is capable to effectively implement its mission on the basis of the Helsinki principles, including the establishment of new and sustainable security arrangements in the region. As the OSCE approaches the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Accords, OSCE participating States and people in the vast OSCE region are living through the worst security crisis in many decades, encompassing all three dimensions of comprehensive security”.

The authors of the Declaration also drew special attention to the fact that “despite repeated calls issued by civil society organisations, including in the outcome documents of all previous OSCE Parallel Conferences, to OSCE bodies and participating States to take a strong action to protect civil society space and reverse the backlash against independent NGOs and civic activists, legislation and practices restricting the right to freedom of association continue to be actively developed and applied by governments in the OSCE region. Worst repressive practices aimed at curtailing independent civic participation and shutting down critical voices are being reproduced by non-democratic regimes in a growing number of participating States. A war against independent civil society aimed at its elimination is expanding”.

Essentially, this document reflects trends that civil society organisations actively involved in OSCE activities have observed for at least the past twenty years, about which they have repeatedly expressed serious concern and alarm. Moreover, this declaration was published even before a series of steps taken by the new US administration in February-March this year, which, alongside certain other events (the Russia-Ukraine war, the Middle East conflict, etc.), is leading to tectonic shifts before our eyes regarding the place and significance of the universal values of freedom, democracy, rule of law and human rights in the modern world.

As someone who grew up in the Soviet Union, but was later inspired by “perestroika”, which brought freedom, the emerging sprouts of democracy in the post-Soviet space, the beginnings of civil society, and the possibility to somehow influence the development of my country, I have the impression that we have begun moving in a downward spiral. This is because much of what is happening now, I already witnessed 35-40 years ago.

A brief history

The adoption of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975 represented a significant step forward, albeit declarative, in recognising the value of human rights and freedoms. Having participated in developing the Universal

¹ Malta Declaration: A stronger and reformed OSCE is needed to ensure its ability to implement its mission and effectively respond to the crisis threatening our comprehensive security.

<https://civicsolidarity.org/article/osce-parallel-civil-society-conference-called-for-reforming-the-osce-protecting-civil-society-space-and-the-mobilization-of-efforts-to-support-ukraine-and-resist-russian-aggression/>

Declaration of Human Rights, the Soviet Union as a whole—and separately Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1968 and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 1973. These countries had thus signed legally binding documents containing guarantees for human rights observance. At the same time, there was no doubt that these socialist states would not comply with their obligations, particularly regarding political rights and civil liberties.

Therefore, regarding the Helsinki Final Act—which included respect for human rights in Section VII alongside security cooperation and economic development issues—there were also no illusions, especially since this document was not legally binding. Essentially, its adoption created a dialogue platform for discussing various issues, including human rights, despite the absence of any prospects that such dialogue on the human dimension would lead to systemic changes, given the totalitarian or authoritarian nature of political regimes entrenched in the “socialist camp” countries.

I believe we must address a fundamental “terminological” problem that persists to this day, especially when discussing human rights. The UN, OSCE, and many other global or regional organisations are routinely described as “international,” though it would be more accurate to characterise them as “intergovernmental” or even “inter-elite.” This distinction matters because democratic states have governments elected through free and fair elections (though even here certain caveats apply in some countries), thereby representing their peoples to varying degrees, or at minimum the majority that voted for them. Conversely, in dictatorships and totalitarian or authoritarian states, governments represent not their peoples but elite groups who have secured power through undemocratic procedures, relying on security structures and essentially representing only themselves on the international stage. The legitimacy of these governments remains profoundly questionable, yet existing global and regional organisations operate on the presumption that all possess equal legitimacy and can engage in meaningful “human rights dialogue.”

This March, the V-Dem Institute released its latest annual report analysing the state of democracy worldwide over the past year. For the first time in 20 years, the number of autocracies globally has surpassed democracies: 91 autocratic regimes (56 electoral and 35 closed) compared to 88 democracies (29 liberal and 59 electoral)².

This composition of “international” organisations, particularly regarding human rights, creates an utterly surrealistic landscape that Franz Kafka and George Orwell might have been uniquely qualified to describe. In the UN Human Rights Council, which examines human rights situations worldwide, some of the world’s most repressive regimes—North Korea, Eritrea, Turkmenistan, and Equatorial Guinea—have already presented three or four reports on their supposed “successes” in fulfilling international human rights obligations.

Meanwhile, recommendations to reporting states, including democratic ones, come from current Council members such as Cuba, China, Sudan, and Eritrea itself. In this environment, meaningful discussion of universal values, international standards, or human rights criteria becomes virtually impossible. Even the legally binding international human rights treaties—hundreds adopted over the past five decades—function as second-class law that autocracies routinely ignore without facing consequences.

2 “Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?”

https://www.v-dem.net/documents/54/v-dem_dr_2025_lowres_v1.pdf

Returning to our historical context: The adoption of the Helsinki Final Act served as a catalyst for human rights defenders and activists across both Western Europe and the Soviet Union. In 1976, Yuri Orlov and fellow dissidents established the Public Group to Promote the Implementation of the Helsinki Accords in the USSR (later renamed the Moscow Helsinki Group). This group published the accords and emphasised their recognition that human rights transcend the domestic affairs of individual states. Similar monitoring groups subsequently emerged in Ukraine, Armenia, Lithuania, Georgia, as well as throughout Western Europe and the United States. This development marked the beginning of an institutionalised human rights movement across the OSCE region. Predictably, however, participants in such groups throughout the USSR immediately faced systematic repression.

It is worth noting that until 1994, today's OSCE was known as the CSCE—Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe—reflecting its non-institutionalised format for dialogue between West and East. “Perestroika” and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union created opportunities for reforming and strengthening this framework.

In 1990-1991, several landmark CSCE documents addressing the human dimension were adopted. The 1990 Copenhagen Document established comprehensive standards and commitments regarding fundamental human rights, including freedom of expression, protection from discrimination, and the conduct of free and fair elections³. The 1991 Moscow Document took a decisive stance, emphasising that “the participating States stress that issues relating to human rights, fundamental freedoms, democracy and the rule of law are of international concern, as respect for these rights and freedoms constitutes one of the foundations of the international order. They categorically and irrevocably declare that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned”⁴.

The 1990s witnessed the strengthening of OSCE structures, enhancing its organisational and expert capacity. A three-tiered mechanism for political consultations was established alongside the Office for Free Elections, now known as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Specialised institutions emerged, including the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, ODIHR expert panels on freedom of religion or belief and freedom of assembly and association, among others. The OSCE's expert capacity grew significantly. Monitoring of local, parliamentary and presidential elections in OSCE participating States was established on a permanent basis.

From 1993, OSCE Meetings on human dimension began to take place, with human rights organisations also participating. But times change, and the world changes.

Human Rights – Hostages to Geopolitical and Domestic Political Contexts

The past 25 years, including the period following Vladimir Putin's rise to power in Russia, have demonstrated the undeniable dominance of “Realpolitik” over the universal values formulated after World War II.

3 Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, 1990 <https://www.oscepa.org/ru/dokumenty/election-observation/election-observation-reports/documents/2463-osce-copenhagen-document-1990-rus/file>

4 Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE, 1991 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/a/14314.pdf>

About fifteen years ago at a conference, I proposed the thesis that in today's world, democracy, rule of law, human rights and civil society face four "enemies": the weaponisation of oil and gas, the substitution of fighting terrorism and extremism with fighting political opposition, and civil society, and geopolitical considerations. To these we can now add a fifth enemy—disinformation and aggressive propaganda conducted by totalitarian and authoritarian states in the media, and especially in Internet spaces and social networks. All these "enemies," to varying degrees and however sad it is to acknowledge, are winning—both at international and national levels. The entire international system of security and values is cracking and disintegrating before our eyes, with human rights held hostage to these processes.

These trends have also affected the OSCE. It is sufficient to recall that for several years now, OSCE Human Dimension Meetings have not been held due to lack of consensus. Instead, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, with ODIHR support, organises conferences on the human dimension, which are similar in content to the previously held meetings but, of course, differ in status.

Generally, the consensus-based decision-making approach works well when all parties share common values and principles, with only differences in details requiring compromise. But when there is no general agreement on basic conceptions of democracy, rule of law and human rights, even compromise becomes impossible. The OSCE has come to resemble the UN Security Council, albeit with 57 countries possessing veto power.

A former ODIHR Director once ironically remarked to civil activists that there are two pieces of news for them: one bad and one good. The bad news was that there was virtually no chance of any breakthrough human dimension documents being adopted within the current OSCE framework. The "good" news was that the lack of consensus also prevented the revision of previously adopted documents containing human rights standards.

The advancement of OSCE commitments in the human dimension also encountered active resistance from authoritarian state authorities. OSCE field activities that existed in several countries across the region were downgraded to programme offices or closed entirely. Reports from election observation monitoring missions face harsh criticism, and their recommendations are often ignored. Authoritarian governments closely monitor human rights projects and programmes implemented or supported by the OSCE, expressing diplomatic displeasure or even blocking their implementation.

Moreover, authorities in totalitarian and authoritarian OSCE participating States began employing a new "know-how"—bringing representatives of so-called "governmental NGOs", or GONGOs, to OSCE human dimension forums. These are not necessarily organisations created by the authorities themselves, but clearly pro-government public organisations whose main task is to promote state "successes" and discredit independent human rights NGOs.

Both internationally and nationally, there has been a deliberate conflation of concepts: "society" with "civil society," and "public organisations" with "civil society organisations" or NGOs.

This raises a serious conceptual question—a question of meaning—as we need to define which society we are discussing. On one hand, there is society with its traditional institutions and connections, and on the other, there is civil society as a modern concept of the existence and functioning of society's most active segment. In this latter phrase, the key word is the first one—"civil"—which defines a citizen not merely through political-

legal connections to the state in the form of an identity card or passport, but additionally through civic activity as a source of power and a taxpayer who monitors and makes claims against the state when their own or others' rights and legitimate interests are infringed. These claims are directed primarily at the executive branch, as it is responsible for implementing laws and spending "public" money based on the principle that human beings, their lives, rights and freedoms are the highest values in the state.

Secondly, civil society is not simply an aggregation of NGOs, but rather a sphere or space comprising individual people, politically active citizens, civic activists, public initiatives, and numerous formal and informal groups not necessarily institutionalised as NGOs. These individuals, groups and organisations have a multitude of diverse objectives. They represent horizontal self-organisation aimed at addressing common (and not only common) problems—without the state when it is not needed, or by appealing to the state when its response and assistance are required. This is not the Soviet concept of society as a state assistant. Moreover, civil society is largely a sphere that in some ways opposes the state, based on the principle that people are the source of power, and human rights and freedoms are the highest value that should determine both legislation and the state's law enforcement practices. It is the people, in the form of voters and taxpayers, who confer authority upon state officials and provide them with funds to perform these duties, and therefore exercise oversight.

This is precisely why, despite the Soviet Union having many public organisations—women's, children's, veterans'—which "under the leadership" of the Communist Party built a "socialist future," no one called this civil society.

Generally, in dictatorships and authoritarian states, there are few or no conditions for political competition, development of political parties, independent trade unions, free media, and active civic organisations. The absence of democratic institutions and procedures makes the advancement of political rights and civil liberties extremely difficult.

This creates insurmountable obstacles to implementing the Helsinki Accords and various human dimension documents derived from them across many OSCE participating States. Over the years, the OSCE, its structures, expert panels and others have produced dozens of different guidelines, handbooks on various human rights, opinions on draft laws and existing legislation in dozens of states, election monitoring mission reports, and so forth. However, both legislation and especially enforcement practices often move in the opposite direction throughout the OSCE region.

The Helsinki Accords and the CSCE (OSCE) played their role in advancing human rights and freedoms, particularly in the 1990s, but in the first quarter of the 21st century, we are witnessing a serious rollback across the entire international human rights protection system. This presents a significant challenge to democratic states, civil societies, and activists worldwide—a challenge for which an effective response has yet to be found.

Conclusions

Over the past 15 years, beginning in 2010, the Civic Solidarity Platform (mentioned earlier) has regularly organised parallel conferences and adopted final documents (declarations) with recommendations to participating States and OSCE governing bodies on human dimension issues. These primarily addressed general questions of enhancing OSCE effectiveness and expanding space for civil society, and included recommendations regarding specific rights and freedoms—particularly freedom from torture, non-

discrimination, freedom of expression, religion, assembly and association, and the rights of vulnerable groups. However, recent years have been marked by evident attacks on civil society through the adoption of “foreign agents” laws, discreditation and stigmatisation of human rights organisations, and a general retreat from universal human values under the guise of protecting so-called “traditional values.” This has forced a shift from specific issues to broader, conceptual confrontations between archaic and modern perspectives, between ideals and cynicism.

This compelled the authors of the aforementioned Malta Declaration, adopted in early December 2024 at the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, to note that: “for civil society representatives, it is evident that fundamental OSCE reforms are necessary. OSCE bodies and participating States must consider what should be preserved and strengthened, what should be abandoned or radically changed, and what should be developed instead. Essentially, it is about “rethinking the OSCE” to make it fit for new challenging times.”

There are fundamental principles that must be preserved. The concept of comprehensive security, the importance of multilateral cooperation, and the unique place that the OSCE assigns to civil society remain as important today as they were 50 years ago. We need to maintain these conceptual frameworks and develop new tools that will allow the Helsinki concept to work effectively in conditions where many states are no longer like-minded.

Essentially, we face a challenge not only to the existence of the OSCE in the form it took in the early 1990s, transforming from a dialogue platform into a fully-fledged organisation, but to the very foundation of human coexistence in the 21st century, which was conceptually formulated after World War II. As I see it, this will be a difficult and lengthy struggle, although I see no alternative to freedom, democracy, and the universal value of human rights.

Defending Media Freedom in a Changing World

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Media Freedom as a Pillar of Security

Fifty years ago, the Helsinki Final Act set out a new vision for Europe – one where peace depended on openness. The Helsinki Final Act did more than address geopolitical tensions, –it pledged support for fundamental freedoms, including open information exchange and cultural interaction. For the first time, countries from both the Western and Eastern blocs committed to enabling the free flow of information and removing barriers to journalism. This was a landmark acknowledgment that free media is essential to peace, security and democracy.

Among its landmark commitments, the 1975 Helsinki Accords explicitly enshrined the “essential and influential role of the press and media” and pledged to facilitate “the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds”. At its core, the 1975 Helsinki Final Act was about more than ending military threats: it committed states to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. In the “Third Basket” on cooperation in economics, science and environment, the Final Act placed special emphasis on information exchange and cultural contacts. Crucially, it noted that “the essential and influential role of the press, radio, television, cinema and news agencies... is to be emphasized”, and that states should “facilitate the freer and wider dissemination of information of all kinds”. In other words, governments agreed to remove barriers so that journalists could work across borders and citizens could access a diversity of news.

This promise was revolutionary during the Cold War: East and West agreed that independent media and access to information were not just ideals but security goals. Today, on the Golden Jubilee of the OSCE, we look back at that original media-freedom bargain and ask: have 50 years of OSCE history honoured the Helsinki promise – or has it been left behind?

The commitments made in Helsinki were visionary, anticipating a Europe where open discourse would serve as the bedrock of democracy, and where independent journalism would act as a bulwark against authoritarianism. Yet in 2025, these ideals face profound and expanding challenges, and the answer is mixed. On one hand, the OSCE has built a unique international watchdog – the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) – and achieved concrete advances, such as safer conditions for some journalists and reforms of abusive laws. These commitments were a breakthrough. For the first time, in the Helsinki Final Act 35 countries from Europe, North America and the Soviet bloc jointly declared that media freedom was a cornerstone of security. They pledged to “improve the conditions under which journalists from one participating State exercise their profession in another”. In practical terms this meant allowing foreign newspapers and radio broadcasts and easing restrictions on travel by journalists.

On the other hand, the media environment now faces new challenges such as rampant disinformation, digital-age censorship and AI-powered controls that were unimaginable in 1975. Above all, the gap between rhetoric and reality remains wide. In too many OSCE states, political leaders pay lip-service to media freedom in public, even as they throttle independent outlets at home. As the OSCE’s 50th anniversary unfolds, the crucial question is not just what commitments were made in 1975, but whether participating States today have the political will to fulfil them in practice – ensuring that media freedom is more than a Cold War-era promise.

From Typewriters to Algorithms: Shifting Foundations of Media Freedom

In the decades since the Helsinki Final Act, the media landscape has undergone profound change. Journalism

in 1975 was largely the domain of newspapers, radio, and state-controlled broadcasters. Information travelled slowly. Editors and journalists acted as the primary gatekeepers, shaping public agendas through ethical standards and professional judgment.

The media environment has undergone dramatic change since 1975. Traditional journalism—once centered on newspapers and broadcasters—has been replaced by a complex digital ecosystem. The internet democratized content creation and access, empowering individuals to share information globally. It democratized access to information, enabling anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection to broadcast globally. Initially, this seemed a triumph for free expression: marginalized voices found platforms, and public discourse expanded beyond traditional elites.

But the promise of democratization came with unexpected costs. Information became abundant, but its quality, accuracy, and trustworthiness declined. Algorithms—not human editors—became the arbiters of what billions of people see and share. These algorithms prioritize engagement over enlightenment, profit over public good. Sensationalism outpaces substance, outrage eclipses reason. Today’s media freedom is thus defined not merely by the absence of state censorship, but by the ability—or inability—to reach audiences through systems designed for commercial, not civic, purposes.

Disinformation now spreads at unprecedented speed, weaponized by both state and non-state actors. Artificial intelligence (AI) amplifies the reach and sophistication of propaganda and censorship. Trust in public institutions—and in the media itself—has eroded under a deluge of falsehoods. The velocity and scale of harmful content expose fragile vulnerabilities, posing direct threats to peace, security, and democracy.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media: A Pillar of International Human Rights

The OSCE’s dedicated mechanism for media freedom – the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) – was established in 1997. This was the world’s first inter-governmental media watchdog.

In an age of profound geopolitical tension and rapid technological upheaval, the defence of fundamental rights demands bold, principled leadership. Within the global architecture of human rights protection, the RFoM stands as a vital and irreplaceable institution—an early-warning mechanism, a steadfast advocate, and a tireless guardian of one of democracy’s most essential pillars: freedom of expression. Since its establishment, the RFoM has embodied the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act: the understanding that security, democracy, and human rights are inseparable. In a world where information can be both a shield and a weapon, the Representative’s mandate—to observe, report, and intervene on behalf of free and independent media—has only grown more vital.

Freedom of the media is not merely a national concern; it is a transnational imperative that underpins peace, security, and human dignity across borders. The OSCE RFoM occupies a unique position within international human rights mechanisms: it acts swiftly and proactively, issuing urgent interventions when journalists are threatened; it holds governments accountable, reminding States of their commitments to protect journalists and the free flow of information; and it serves as a bridge between governments, civil society, and media actors, fostering dialogue in times of tension and crisis.

The RFoM’s strength lies not in coercive power, but in moral authority, impartiality, and an unyielding

commitment to truth. Where others may hesitate, the Representative raises their voice. Where censorship grows, the RFoM shines a light. Where journalists are silenced, the RFoM speaks in their defense—ensuring that abuses are neither hidden nor normalized.

This remarkable legacy is the result not only of the vision embedded in its mandate, but of the dedication, professionalism, and courage of the individuals who have built and sustained the office over decades. Every Representative—past and present—has contributed uniquely to shaping the RFoM’s authority and credibility. Their leadership has been complemented and made possible by the tireless work of the teams who, often behind the scenes, monitor threats, document abuses, foster dialogue, and defend the principles of media freedom with integrity and persistence. It is thanks to the collective efforts of these devoted professionals—across generations—that the RFoM has become a cornerstone of the international human rights architecture. Their commitment ensures that media freedom remains not just an aspiration, but a living standard against which democracies must be measured.

In the broader system, the RFoM complements and reinforces global frameworks such as those of the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and regional courts. It fills a critical niche: focusing specifically on media freedom as an early indicator of democratic decline and as a foundation of resilient societies. Today, as disinformation campaigns, digital repression, and violence against journalists threaten the very foundations of open societies, the RFoM’s mission is more essential than ever. Defending media freedom is not a secondary concern—it is a frontline defense of human rights, the rule of law, and international peace.

The RFoM reminds us that freedom of expression is not an abstract ideal, but a lived, daily struggle requiring vigilance, solidarity, and courage. It embodies the conviction that where media freedom thrives, democracy flourishes—and where it falters, injustice gains ground. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is not merely a monitor of commitments. It is a beacon for truth-seekers, a shield for those who speak truth to power, and a living testament to the belief that without free media, no society can truly be free.

Media Freedom in Transformation

During my tenure as OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media between 2010 and 2017, I witnessed firsthand the courage of journalists operating under extreme pressure. Across the OSCE region, independent journalists and outlets continue to work despite political intimidation, economic strangulation, and physical threats.

New threats transcend traditional censorship. Disinformation campaigns—often orchestrated across borders—flood public discourse with falsehoods. Opaque algorithms and AI-driven content curation manipulate public perception invisibly. Journalists now face harassment not only from hostile governments but also from coordinated online mobs and anonymous automated accounts.

Social media has transformed how people communicate, access information, and engage with the world. Platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have disrupted traditional media ecosystems, giving rise to new forms of journalism, activism, and public discourse. While these developments have expanded media freedom in some ways, they have also introduced new threats. The impact is complex: social media is both a tool for empowerment and a platform for control.

The rise of social media has enabled ordinary citizens to document and report events in real-time, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. From conflict zones to protest movements, social media platforms have allowed marginalized voices to reach global audiences. Smartphones with cameras and internet access allow ordinary people to document and share events in real time. From protests to natural disasters, users can bypass traditional gatekeepers and report what they see directly to a global audience. Such citizen journalism has been transformative, especially in environments where state-controlled media dominate. It exposes injustice, disrupts censorship, and holds power to account.

Social media enables individuals, organizations, and independent creators to reach audiences without needing approval from editors, publishers, or networks. This shift can protect media freedom from corporate or political influence, allowing dissenting opinions and niche perspectives to flourish.

For independent journalists and marginalized groups, this is powerful. They can publish their work, build followings, and create alternative narratives. Whistleblowers can leak information anonymously. Activists can organize online and rally support. In this sense, social media helps counterbalance monopolies on information.

However, the same platforms that expand access to information also control what users see. Social media feeds are curated by algorithms designed to maximize engagement, not accuracy or diversity. This creates echo chambers, distorts public perception, and limits the variety of viewpoints people encounter.

More troubling is the power these algorithms give tech companies to shape discourse. Facebook's decision to suppress certain news stories or X's content moderation policies can effectively control what narratives rise or fall. Though private companies are not governments, their decisions have enormous implications for media freedom.

Social media has also made it easier to spread disinformation, propaganda, and conspiracy theories. Fake news can travel faster than the truth, especially when it seems to confirm existing beliefs or provokes strong emotions. Governments, political actors, and bad-faith users exploit this to manipulate public opinion or discredit legitimate journalism.

This has two major effects on media freedom. First, it floods the public space with noise, making it harder for reliable sources to be heard. Second, it undermines trust in all media. If people can't tell what's true or who to believe, even legitimate journalism suffers.

Governments have responded to social media's disruptive power in different ways. In democracies, they often grapple with balancing free speech and the need to curb harmful content. In authoritarian regimes, the response is more aggressive: surveillance, censorship, internet blackouts, and laws that criminalize dissent online.

Social media can thus become a tool of repression. Authorities monitor posts, track users, and arrest critics for what they publish online. China's Great Firewall, Russia's crackdown on online dissent, and the surveillance of journalists in countries like Iran or Egypt illustrate how digital platforms can be weaponized.

Despite these challenges, social media also empowers resistance. Campaigns for press freedom, digital

rights, and transparency are increasingly global and digitally coordinated. Organizations like Reporters Without Borders, Human Rights Watch, and the Electronic Frontier Foundation use these platforms to expose violations and rally support.

Social media allows suppressed stories to reach international audiences, increasing pressure on governments and companies alike. Journalists at risk can find solidarity, funding, and visibility online. In this sense, the same tools used to suppress can also be used to defend.

In short, social media has reshaped the landscape of media freedom. On one side, it democratizes publishing, enables resistance, and challenges old power structures. On the other, it introduces new forms of control, surveillance, and manipulation. The challenge is to preserve the benefits while mitigating the risks.

Moving forward, media freedom in the digital age will depend on thoughtful regulation, stronger digital literacy, platform accountability, and global cooperation. The goal should not be to shut down social media but to ensure it serves the public interest. As the line between user and publisher blurs, the responsibility for safeguarding truth and freedom falls on all of us.

The Indispensable Role of Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism remains a cornerstone of democratic oversight, exposing corruption and abuse. But it is under severe strain. Journalists require time, resources, and safety to conduct deep reporting—all of which are increasingly threatened.

Many OSCE countries see journalists targeted with lawsuits, surveillance, and economic pressure. Digital smear campaigns, especially against women journalists, have become common. These attacks silence critical voices and foster widespread self-censorship. Legal pressures exacerbate the threat. Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) are increasingly deployed to burden independent media with costly, protracted litigation designed to exhaust and intimidate them.

The economic fragility of journalism magnifies these vulnerabilities. Across the OSCE region, independent outlets struggle to survive amid declining advertising revenues, fierce competition for attention, and monopolistic media ownership. In smaller markets, politically aligned oligarchs or corporations dominate the information environment, subtly but powerfully capturing public discourse.

Despite fifty years of commitments under the Helsinki Final Act, the reality remains grim in parts of the OSCE region. Journalists continue to be imprisoned simply for doing their jobs: exposing corruption, criticizing government policies, or challenging entrenched interests. In authoritarian contexts, independent outlets are branded as “foreign agents,” “extremists,” or “terrorists,” providing pretexts for harassment and closure. Their incarceration sends a chilling message: dare to speak truth to power, and you will be silenced.

Even more troubling is the widespread impunity for violence against journalists. In many OSCE participating States, investigative journalists face threats not just to their livelihoods, but to their lives. Across the OSCE region, murders of journalists—often those investigating organized crime, corruption, or abuses—remain unsolved for years, sometimes decades. Investigations stall. Witnesses vanish. Perpetrators, often shielded by power, walk free.

Supporting investigative journalism is not optional. It is a central pillar of democratic resilience. Without protection and support, the promise of media freedom collapses. The OSCE must reaffirm that journalist safety is non-negotiable. States must be held accountable for failing to protect journalists and for enabling impunity. Concrete actions—including independent investigations, judicial reforms, and sustained international pressure—are essential.

Supporting investigative journalism, defending imprisoned journalists, and ending impunity for crimes against media professionals must become strategic priorities—not symbolic gestures. Without real consequences for those who harm journalists, the promises of Helsinki ring hollow.

The Role of Journalists in War and Conflict: Bearing Witness When It Matters Most

War distorts truth. Propaganda thrives, facts are weaponized, and silence often covers atrocities. In these moments, journalists play a critical role: they bear witness, document reality, and provide the public—and history—with an unfiltered account of events on the ground. In wartime, facts are often the first casualty. Independent journalists play a crucial role in countering propaganda, documenting human rights abuses, and informing the world about conditions on the ground. Despite threats to their safety, many continue to report from war zones. Their work influences humanitarian aid, policy responses, and historical memory. Yet many are treated as adversaries—arrested, censored, or even killed. Protecting them is not optional; it is a test of a society's commitment to justice and truth.

Journalists in conflict zones risk their lives to gather facts. They report from frontline trenches, bombed-out cities, refugee camps, and military briefings. Their work helps the world understand what's really happening—not just what governments or armed groups claim. In many wars, independent journalism is the only counterforce to disinformation. When institutions fail or collapse, the reporter with a camera or notepad often becomes the most trusted source of truth.

The role of journalists isn't just to tell stories—it's to expose war crimes, amplify the voices of civilians, and hold powerful actors accountable. Their reporting can pressure governments to act, mobilize humanitarian aid, and even become evidence in international courts. Journalists also shape how conflicts are remembered. Without them, much of the human cost of war would remain invisible.

Despite their vital role, journalists are often treated as enemies by those in power. Many are killed, kidnapped, detained, or censored. Some are targeted simply for refusing to tow the official line. In modern warfare, information is a battlefield—and journalists are on the frontlines. Despite the risks, many continue to report, not because it is safe, but because it's necessary. When journalists are silenced, impunity grows. When they're protected, truth has a fighting chance.

Protecting the safety and independence of journalists in war is not a side issue—it's central to defending human rights, democracy, and peace.

The Evolving Threat Landscape: From Disinformation to AI Manipulation

Technology has opened extraordinary possibilities for journalism—data-driven investigations, real-time reporting—but the same tools have accelerated the erosion of media freedom.

Artificial intelligence is rapidly transforming journalism—offering new tools for data analysis and content production. But it also presents urgent threats. Automated content moderation systems frequently mislabel legitimate journalism, especially in non-dominant languages or high-risk regions. Biased training data can lead to disproportionate takedowns, silencing critical voices.

Governments increasingly use AI-driven surveillance tools to monitor and intimidate reporters, undermining source confidentiality and personal safety. Deepfakes and other synthetic content challenge the very notion of truth in public discourse.

Freedom of expression now includes the right to be heard, the right to access credible information, and protection from algorithmic manipulation. The digital public sphere is no longer neutral—platforms, code, and data policies shape what is possible.

Disinformation—often state-sponsored or amplified by malign actors—polarizes communities, undermines democratic institutions, and weakens societal trust. These dangers are now magnified by AI-enabled challenges. AI is rapidly transforming how content is created, disseminated, and moderated. While it offers opportunities to improve access to information and support journalistic work, it also introduces grave risks that demand urgent attention.

The speed, scale, and sophistication of these threats far outpace traditional regulatory frameworks. Defending media freedom now requires new strategies, tools, and partnerships.

One pressing concern is AI-driven content moderation. Automated systems, designed to detect and remove harmful material, often lack the nuance to distinguish hate speech from satire or incitement from legitimate reporting. Mistaken takedowns—particularly of content from journalists, activists, and minority groups—can have life-or-death consequences, especially in high-risk environments. Moreover, moderation systems are often trained on biased datasets, reflecting and reinforcing existing inequalities. Outsourced and automated moderation—without sufficient local context or language expertise—disproportionately silences marginalized voices.

Beyond moderation, AI is increasingly deployed in surveillance and predictive policing under vague or abusive legal frameworks. Journalists are targeted with facial recognition technology and spyware, endangering source confidentiality, eroding privacy, and stifling independent reporting. In authoritarian settings, such technologies are used to identify dissenters and suppress criticism under the guise of national security. Generative AI has enabled the mass production of false or misleading content. Deepfakes—hyper-realistic fabricated videos and audio—are cheap, scalable, and increasingly indistinguishable from authentic material. They can discredit journalists, manipulate public opinion, and sow confusion during elections, further eroding trust in visual and textual evidence.

Algorithms that drive search engines and social media feeds prioritize sensationalism and misinformation to maximize engagement and profit. Nuanced investigative journalism is often buried under viral outrage and disinformation. Pressing questions about AI-driven accountability, content moderation standards, surveillance practices, and the ethical production of media must be urgently addressed. While innovation must be fostered, fundamental rights must not be sacrificed. Responses so far have been fragmented, inadequate, and inconsistent.

Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression: Inseparable Rights

Media freedom cannot be considered in isolation from the broader right to freedom of expression. In the digital age, millions have found new voices through social media and citizen journalism. Yet this democratization has unleashed unprecedented disorder. Meaningful freedom of expression requires: the right not merely to speak, but to be heard; the right to factual, fair, and adequate information; protection against algorithmic suppression and manipulation; defense against disinformation deliberately engineered to distort democratic debate.

The OSCE's unique human dimension commitments position it to bridge principle and practice. Doing so demands renewed political will and innovative, forward-looking responses.

Technology reflects the values, biases, and intentions of its creators, deployers, and regulators. It is not neutral, nor has it consistently respected ethical professional standards. Without strong ethical frameworks, technology will continue to corrode the democratic information space. A rights-based approach to digital governance must:

- Demand transparency and accountability in algorithm design and deployment.
- Ensure diversity in AI training datasets to counter systemic discrimination.
- Protect journalistic autonomy and the confidentiality of sources.
- Establish ethical standards for the creation, dissemination, and moderation of AI-generated content.

Looking Ahead: A Legacy Renewed

As we commemorate fifty years of the Helsinki spirit, the OSCE stands at a critical juncture. Media freedom, freedom of expression, and the integrity of public discourse face existential threats. AI and tech giants are no longer mere disruptors; they are now the architects of the global information ecosystem. By broadening its commitments to reflect new realities, the OSCE can renew its legacy—strengthening protections, enhancing oversight, and holding both states and corporations accountable. It can ensure that the next fifty years build societies where truth prevails, voices flourish, and security rests on inclusive, informed dialogue. The Golden Jubilee must be a call to bold, united action—for the sake of our security, peace, and shared democratic future.

Many OSCE states continue to endorse the Helsinki principles in declarations and speeches, yet fail to act on them at home. The RFoM's experience is that “values and commitments” to media freedom are only as good as the will to uphold them. This is why political will is the linchpin of progress. Without governments in the OSCE actively enforcing protections – from ensuring safety to fostering pluralism – the best policies on paper will not translate into reality.

The OSCE's next fifty years must be defined not only by vigilance against digital threats but by an uncompromising commitment to those who risk everything to tell the truth. Safeguarding investigative

journalism, securing justice for murdered reporters, and freeing those unjustly imprisoned are not optional goals—they are tests of whether the spirit of the Helsinki Act endures. In an era of deepening digital challenges, the OSCE’s role in fostering dialogue, setting standards, highlighting misconduct, and defending its core principles remains as vital today as it was five decades ago. The future of media freedom—and of democracy itself—depends on it.

As the OSCE marks its 50th anniversary, the media freedom chapter of its legacy is still being written. The Helsinki Final Act’s ideals – free press, exchange of information, cultural openness – remain as vital as ever, but meeting them demands new strategies. The OSCE is now chaired by Finland (in 2025), which has highlighted the need to “re-kindle the original Helsinki spirit of compromise and cooperation” in a fractious era. For media freedom, that means both recommitting to old promises and tackling modern challenges.

First, governments must back up words with deeds. OSCE participating States should embed Helsinki principles in concrete laws and budgets. This could include legal reforms such as abolishing remaining criminal defamation laws and punitive media regulations; ensuring public broadcasters are editorially independent; enforcing antitrust rules so media markets aren’t dominated by hidden oligarchs; and protecting journalists’ safety with speedy investigations of attacks. States should also open space for more diverse media – for example by supporting community radio and easing restrictions on foreign news exchange as envisaged in the Final Act. Technical progress must not excuse regression: authorities should resist the temptation to use AI or cybersecurity concerns as pretexts for censorship.

Second, transparency and accountability are key. OSCE bodies and civil society can help by documenting violations and calling them out. The 2018 OSCE Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists obliges states to foster a safe environment for reporters; civil society and parliaments must keep pressing states to uphold that commitment. Greater involvement of parliamentarians (such as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly) and of independent courts can inject more political will into meeting OSCE norms. Peer pressure works: when one country tightens the screws, others will notice and face diplomatic consequences.

Third, the OSCE itself must stay relevant. Its RFoM office should continue to innovate. The OSCE can also foster dialogue between media and tech companies to write “transparency requirements” into platforms’ policies, so that users know why content is promoted or removed. The OSCE and its partners should encourage models that make journalists economically viable without fear of oligarch influence or state subsidy strings.

Ultimately, Helsinki’s promise was that enduring security in Europe requires respect for basic freedoms. Media freedom is not a luxury; it is a safety valve in any healthy society. When people can speak truth to power and share information freely, the society becomes more resilient. As we reflect on 50 years of the OSCE, we should remember that freedom of the media is the fundamental right that underpins all others. It protects everything from peaceful protest to corruption exposés. The OSCE’s original vision was forward-looking – we must renew that vision. With strong political will, commitment to Helsinki’s spirit, and adaptation to today’s realities, the next 50 years can see media freedom flourish rather than falter.

OSCE Election Observation: Credible, Inclusive, Cost- Effective

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Abstract

This article explores how OSCE election observation evolved since 1990 into a vital means of ensuring transparency of electoral processes and assessing how they conform with international standards, resulting in recommendations that assist states in improving electoral performance and thus contributing to comprehensive security. It describes how OSCE ODIHR overcame challenges to developing rigorous methodology and organising credible observation, gaining recognition for impartiality, adapting to change, maximising inclusivity, and ensuring efficient resource utilisation. These and other challenges to the sustainability of OSCE election work must constantly be managed through effective leadership and professional engagement of ODIHR staff in partnership with supportive governments, parliamentarians, and civil society.

Introduction

Leaders attending the 1975 Helsinki Summit were undoubtedly unaware that they were launching a process that would gain attention and respect largely for its work in observing and assessing electoral processes. Although it can be argued that Helsinki signatories made an indirect commitment to hold democratic elections,¹ neither the words “elections” nor “democracy” appear in the Helsinki Final Act or any other CSCE document adopted before 1990. The individuals leading the two largest CSCE states in 1975, US President Gerald Ford and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, had very limited experience with national electoral competition.² Nevertheless, with little if any advance work before 1989, OSCE election observation evolved over the past 35 years into a highly credible means of increasing electoral transparency and providing objective assessments of the extent to which electoral processes conform to OSCE commitments and other international standards. OSCE election observers routinely offer recommendations to assist states in improving their electoral processes, with the ultimate goal of contributing to comprehensive security throughout the region.

By mid-2025, the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) had carried out election-related activities in all but one of its participating States³ and completed some 460 observation or assessment missions involving tens of thousands of professional and volunteer observers. Activities have ranged from several missions with over 1,000 observers across the vast expanses of Ukraine and the Russian Federation to those with several hundred assessing a critical independence referendum in the compact territory of Montenegro and teams of various sizes and formats looking at elections in dozens of countries. ODIHR has deployed election-related activities to countries as small as San Marino and as populous as

1 Participating States agreed in Principle VII of the Helsinki Final Act to “act in conformity with [...] the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Article 21(3) of the Universal Declaration provides that “The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

2 Gerald Ford was elected vice president by the US Congress in 1973 and then became President in 1974 after the previous incumbents of these two posts resigned in disgrace. Earlier, he had easily won multiple races for the US House of Representatives in a Republican-dominated district where he became known through his exploits as a college football star. Leonid Brezhnev owed his real power to a decision of the Soviet Politburo in 1964 and his formal role as head of state to the USSR Supreme Soviet, which unanimously elected him as Chairman of its Presidium in 1977.

3 ODIHR has carried out at least a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) if not a more extensive observation or assessment activity in 56 of its participating States, but for obvious reasons not in the Holy See.

the United States, always upon the required invitation of the host country and with co-operation from its authorities.

While the author of these lines is somewhat cautious about an over-used and sometimes criticized term, many governmental and non-governmental experts frequently characterize the ODIHR's methodological approach as the "gold standard" for this type of work. Other credible international election observer organizations draw heavily on ODIHR practices (often also on its former staff members). Domestic election observers and electoral management bodies such as national election commissions, which should collectively play critical roles in ensuring transparent democratic elections, frequently draw upon ODIHR experience and recommendations to improve their work. And notably, even when the OSCE is largely absent from public discourse, respectable international media and senior foreign policy officials regularly refer to ODIHR findings as a solid basis for determining how well or how poorly states have managed elections. This story has its roots in changes underway in the Soviet Union as well as Central/Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, after Soviet Communist Party leader (and eventual President) Mikhail Gorbachev encouraged limited electoral competition. Partly democratic elections to the USSR Congress of People's Deputies in March 1989 and those leading to a transfer of power in Poland in June 1989 were striking examples of electoral democracy driving political transformation. Although too late to be reflected in the Vienna Concluding Document (VCD) that the CSCE adopted in January 1989, the new reality – that "democracy" and "elections" were legitimate topics in the East as well as the West – was taken up energetically in the 1990 Copenhagen Meeting on the human dimension of security which had already been mandated by the VCD.

The Copenhagen meeting ended with adoption of the clearest possible provisions on the definition of democratic elections, including commitments that remain highly relevant on the need for universal suffrage, impartial administration, equal opportunities for contestants, a clear separation between states and political parties, honest counting of votes, and allowing electoral victors to take office. Perhaps most relevant:

"The participating States consider that the presence of observers, both foreign and domestic, can enhance the electoral process for States in which elections are taking place. They therefore invite observers from any other CSCE participating States and any appropriate private institutions and organizations..."⁴

These Copenhagen commitments were agreed by consensus among all participating States (pS) and given more weight when endorsed later in 1990 by leaders in the Paris Charter for a New Europe, incorporating key election provisions and accepting a proposal to establish a CSCE Office for Free Elections in Warsaw (OFE, which Poland offered to host, and which soon became ODIHR).

While a CSCE / OSCE election observation mandate undoubtedly resulted from the unique political atmosphere of the early 1990s, this era of good feeling alone could not produce what OSCE election observation has become over the past 35 years: highly credible, maximally inclusive, cost-effective and – at least so far – sustainable.

Credibility

CSCE and OSCE commitments on election observation have always been cast in universal terms, applying

4 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/c/14304.pdf>

equally to all pS. Nevertheless, the political focus at the end of the Cold War was based primarily on enthusiasm that the ex-Communist “East” had emerged from autocratic rule – and perhaps a sense that electoral democracy was particularly fragile in some states. It was thus important for ODIHR to develop methodology which focused on the immediate challenges of countries that had little recent experience with democratic elections but also on the longer-term issues that persist where electoral practices were more fully developed.

Three possible criticisms or at least suspicions about election observation, still voiced in some quarters today, have been: a) that the process may involve only superficial contact by friendly visitors, who might too easily endorse or offer legitimacy for any electoral outcome (no matter how dubious); b) that observers might be “too critical” (thus detracting from legitimacy of election winners based on political bias or overly technical criteria); or c) that observers focus only on election day, without understanding or analysing critical pre-election developments or the context in which an election takes place. OSCE ODIHR election observation methodology addresses such potential weaknesses in various ways, first and foremost by ensuring impartiality and by treating election days as part of a larger process.

ODIHR formally guarantees impartiality through insistence that every observer sign a strict code of conduct. Additional measures to ensure that the quality of observation is not tainted by political or personal factors include the competitive recruitment of professional multinational teams, the reliance on “secondment” of long- and short-term observers (LTOs and STOs) from participating States themselves, the deployment of LTOs and STOs in teams of two that always include different nationalities, and the use of objective criteria for reporting and analysis (including statistical data collected on election day in full observation missions from a large number of observers who visit a random sample of polling stations and tabulation centers with standardized questionnaires for all stages of election day).

Moreover, while ODIHR provides the expertise and professional approach necessary for consistent and objective analytical work over the long term, it also cooperates with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and other parliamentary bodies (such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Parliament) which typically deploy observers for around election day. While not without difficulties in the past, this cooperation has been excellent in recent years and helps to ensure that common messages are delivered to host countries and other audiences. The teams deployed by ODIHR and its parliamentary partners base findings and conclusions on their own observations, but they always seek to interact with credible domestic observers (where they exist) to learn as much as possible about the local context and to ensure that key issues are not overlooked. Serious domestic observer organizations, for their part, benefit from ODIHR compilations of relevant commitments as well as handbooks on observation methodology and recommendations from previous elections in the specific country.

Just as expert observers and supporters of democratic development quickly recognised in the early 1990s that democracy involves much more than elections – an early driver of the transition in name and function from the OFE to ODIHR – OSCE pS formally recognized at their 1994 Budapest Summit that ODIHR must look at the entire election cycle. They tasked ODIHR to look at developments before, during and after election day, to assess conformity with relevant standards. ODIHR implements this mandate in part by ensuring that one of its Warsaw-based election advisers follows developments in each OSCE participating State in periods between elections and that Needs Assessment Missions (NAMs) are deployed well in advance of elections to determine what issues merit particular attention. ODIHR thus operationalises the understanding that democracy is a

complicated business and that holding democratic elections goes well beyond “e-day”.

ODIHR missions – ranging from full-scale Election Observations Missions (EOMs) to more targeted Election Assessment Missions (EAMs) and even smaller expert teams – are then structured to look at the key questions. The length of missions is tailored to the needs, with deployments sufficiently early to ensure that experts can observe directly and gain insights from local stakeholders about such critical issues as:

- the legislative framework;
- the functioning of the election administration;
- sources and transparency of campaign finance;
- the media situation;
- the role of women, persons belonging to national minorities, and persons with disabilities in the election process; and
- respect for fundamental freedoms necessary for democratic elections (especially the rights to freedom of association, assembly and expression).

A mission’s findings and conclusions are then duly documented in carefully crafted, publicly accessible statements and reports which provide assessments and recommendations only after the elections (to encourage future improvements while avoiding any interference in the process).

Another challenge for ODIHR has always been to keep up with changing practices, both in terms of election administration in the best sense (use of technology, improvement of voter lists, etc) and more negative phenomena (more sophisticated ways of obscuring and changing actual results, more effective domination of media to the advantage of incumbents, concentration of campaign finance in the hands of a few, often with little transparency, disinformation and foreign interference, etc). While new challenges are always emerging, ODIHR effectively tackles such issues through the evolution and development of the methodology reflected in an overall handbook⁵ and publications addressing many specific aspects of observation.⁶

ODIHR also recognised at a relatively early stage that a simple characterization as “free and fair” (or not) is less helpful than a sophisticated analysis of the extent to which elections meet international standards, along with recommendations for improvement.

Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of ODIHR and many if not all of its formal partners, simplistic terminology continues to be used by less rigorous observers and those with a clearly biased political agenda. The risk of mixed messages from such “fake” observers is constantly present, especially where media are closely controlled. ODIHR thus faces a continuing challenge when interlocutors and the general public fail to

5 See OSCE ODIHR Election Observation Handbook, Sixth Edition, 2010 at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/68439>

6 See the collection of additional handbooks for example on observing voter registration, observation and promoting participation of women in electoral processes, new voting technologies, etc at <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/handbooks>

distinguish between its dedicated professionals, on the ground for an extended period of careful observation, and superficial or fake observers who typically lack a meaningful long-term presence or analytical capacity. One important marker of serious observer organizations is their endorsement of the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers developed by ODIHR and other leading groups, launched at the United Nations in 2005.⁷

Inclusiveness

Closely related to ODIHR's successful development and application of a solid and impartial observation methodology has been the need to guarantee universality or at least broad inclusiveness of observation efforts. Clearly, it is neither feasible nor sensible to deploy equally large teams to all pS (as periodically proposed by the Russian Federation and a few others). However, both fairness and the need for appropriate political messaging – not to mention the fiasco of the 2000 Bush v. Gore election in the United States — made it necessary by the early 2000s for ODIHR to begin looking seriously at countries previously described as “developed democracies”.

ODIHR now deploys NAMs to virtually all pS – including in EU countries and North America – and endeavors to deploy observers wherever needed. Given recent backsliding in countries previously characterized as “old” or successful “new” democracies, constantly reviewing all national elections⁸ in the OSCE area has proven to be highly appropriate. While it can be challenging to attract a sufficient pool of seconded observers, the track record of observation in “the West” is now very impressive.⁹ Nevertheless, in some countries where there is a high level of public confidence in elections and the rule of law, more efforts are still needed to emphasize how local stakeholders and future elections can benefit from an observation mission that offers objective analysis from a neutral perspective as well as recommendations based on international standards and best practices.

A different challenge to inclusiveness and universality has come when some states resist inviting ODIHR observation or only invite ODIHR on terms inconsistent with methodological or operational requirements. The most prominent cases have involved Russia and Belarus, which have at various times either sought to restrict the number and nationalities of observers, offered invitations too late to be meaningful, or declined to invite ODIHR at all. This problem should not be minimized but also not exaggerated, as the overall track record is still excellent. To paraphrase a famous scholar of international law, almost all OSCE participating States almost always welcome ODIHR observation of almost all their national elections.¹⁰ That said, shortly after both Russia and Belarus held elections without issuing timely invitations to ODIHR, it was troubling that Tajikistan invited and received an ODIHR team in early 2025 but then delayed accreditation in a manner that forced the mission to leave.¹¹

A final “inclusiveness” issue relates to the observers themselves. ODIHR is open to all pS wishing to provide LTOs and STOs, though the states themselves must bear any costs. For nearly two decades, this has been

⁷ <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/c/215556.pdf>

⁸ ODIHR also observes local elections and referenda upon invitation.

⁹ Traditional providers of STOs and LTOs have sometimes balked or had legal barriers to sending observers to “Western” countries, especially if funded from sources counted as Official Development Assistance (ODA). Nevertheless, by 2025, observation or assessment missions have worked in virtually all such states.

¹⁰ Professor Louis Henkin wrote in 1979, in *How Nations Behave*, that “almost all nations observe almost all principles of international law and almost all of their obligations almost all of the time”

¹¹ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/tajikistan/585277>

supplemented also through a “Diversification Fund” to facilitate observation from less wealthy States. Nevertheless, the willingness of pS to send a fair share of observers varies considerably. The only two countries that had been relatively consistent from the early days through 2024 in supplying the maximum number of observers for most elections (15 percent of the number requested by ODIHR) were Germany and the US. Several others including the Nordics and Switzerland regularly make out-sized contributions. Russia sometimes contributes large contingents but only on a selective basis. The US introduced a new element of uncertainty when it paused secondments of STOs and LTOs in early 2025; while it resumed limited deployments in May 2025 and appeared ready to continue the practice over the medium-term, its longer-term approach remained unclear.

Cost-Effectiveness and Sustainability

A final set of issues, closely related to the credibility of ODIHR’s observation and the inclusiveness of its approach, involves the efficient use of resources and longer-term sustainability.

The first key point under this rubric is that ODIHR efforts are incredibly cost-effective. The annual ODIHR Election Department budget is just over 6.5 million Euros, providing the base for covering elections in a region with 1.3 billion residents. The annual burden is thus just about one half of one Euro cent per resident of the OSCE area.

Nevertheless, election work competes in a zero-sum reality of no budget increases for ODIHR even to address inflation in over a decade, which increasingly forces ODIHR to make very difficult choices and to keep demonstrating the relevance of its efforts. In the uncertain world of 2025, it would be folly to take for granted that there is sufficient appreciation for the value of election observation work among policy-makers and publics to make it sustainable for the coming years and decades.¹²

Very positive indicators include the regularity with which ODIHR receives invitations to observe, the recognized high quality of ODIHR election reports and recommendations, the extent to which some countries rely upon and follow up ODIHR recommendations when considering electoral reform (as all committed to do at the Istanbul Summit in 1999), and real improvements which have been introduced and implemented in many participating States. Less encouraging is the widespread (and sometimes accurate) perception of back-sliding in many countries – along with a rather *pro forma* approach to following up on ODIHR recommendations and an overall lack of political will to implement the most serious recommendations.

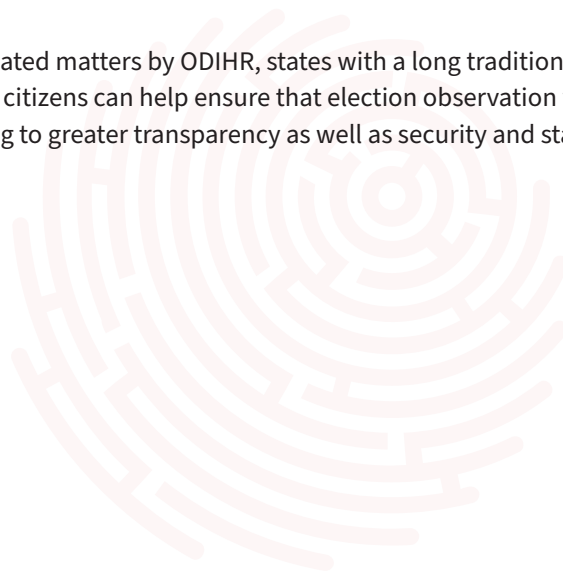
It must be stressed continually that no elections in any country are perfect, that all can be improved and that there is no good substitute for ODIHR reports and recommendations to assist all pS in this process. This remains as true in 2025 as it was in the 1990s and serves as a strong argument for continuation of these activities for the foreseeable future.

To make this more likely, building on the excellent track record of the past 35 years, ODIHR’s leadership should continue to cooperate with participating States, civil society, and other partners to:

¹² Questions about the sustainability of ODIHR election work are not new. See Peter Eicher, “Improving OSCE Election Observation”, in Security and Human Rights Monitor, 2009, no. 4, accessed at <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2017/09/2.-Eicher3.pdf>

- Increase public and policy-maker understanding of the principles underlying and guiding good election observation work, as well as its valuable contribution to greater stability and security.
- Ensure that observation methodology continues to evolve to meet new and emerging challenges, including those related to technology.
- Intensify support for national follow up of ODIHR recommendations, to strengthen the link between observation and real electoral reform.¹³
- Emphasise training and deployment of new observers to transfer skills to the next generation of dedicated professionals.
- Build upon the excellent spirit of partnership that now exists between ODIHR and the OSCE PA as well as other parliamentary bodies.

Engagement on these and related matters by ODIHR, states with a long tradition of support for democratic development, and interested citizens can help ensure that election observation will continue to play a prominent role in contributing to greater transparency as well as security and stability in the OSCE region.



¹³ While OSCE participating States bear responsibility for such follow-up, an excellent co-operative model is a project supported by EU extrabudgetary contributions to promote implementation of ODIHR recommendations in the Western Balkans (see <https://www.osce.org/odihr/support-to-electoral-reforms-in-western-balkans>).

The Inspiration of the Helsinki Final Act for Civil Society in Ukraine

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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring impact of the Helsinki Final Act on Ukrainian civil society, arguing that human rights commitments remain crucial to security and peacebuilding. It chronicles the development of Helsinki Committees and the Centre for Civil Liberties' evolution from documentation of abuses to international advocacy, including evidence-gathering, support for survivors, and campaigns for accountability. The paper situates civil society as a bridge between victims and institutions, emphasizes the need to integrate human rights into reconstruction, and warns that without robust transnational solidarity and legal remedies, sustainable peace will remain unattainable.

“I never dreamt that the communist regime could fall in my lifetime” recalls Martin Šimečka, the Slovak journalist and writer, reflecting on his upbringing during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia.¹ The Helsinki Final Act played a pivotal role in the end of the Cold War and the liberation of millions of people in Eastern Europe. Crucially, it established a respect for “human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief”, forming a solid foundation for peace across Europe.²

By linking security to human rights and the rule of law, the human dimension created a mechanism for bringing domestic human rights violations under international political scrutiny. This led to a dissident movement in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc.³ Figures such as Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel, among others, spoke out about falsehoods and violations of the totalitarian state.⁴

Václav Havel's reflections on civic dissent ask us to picture a greengrocer in communist Czechoslovakia who displays the slogan “Workers of the world, unite!” in his shop window. The grocer is unlikely to genuinely believe in international proletarian solidarity; rather, he displays the sign to signal loyalty to the regime and avoid potential reproach. He is not risking imprisonment or job loss, but he fears being criticised for lacking the correct public “decoration.” The slogan also enables him to mask his pragmatic self-interest — his wish to get by — with a loftier pretext. By doing so, he accepts the rules of a game that asks him to live within a lie. Thus, when someone enters wearing a lapel pin of the Solidarity movement, the grocer's pretence is undone. Confronted with people who openly declare their convictions, both his façade and the façade of the game collapses. In Havel's terms, these are individuals striving to “live in truth.”⁵

The Helsinki Accords were an inspiration for those who sought to live in truth. It inspired and enabled individuals and groups supporting the protection of human rights to formally organise themselves into an OSCE-wide network of Committees and Watch/Monitor groups, with the primary aim of monitoring adherence to the human rights commitments set out in the Helsinki Final Act and its subsequent follow-up documents. This included a distinct Ukrainian Helsinki Committee, (the Ukrainian Helsinki Group), which was founded in

1 Martin M. Simečka, How the Helsinki Final Act changed my life, <https://www.eurozine.com/how-the-helsinki-final-act-changed-my-life/>, 2025

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Final act of the 1st CSCE Summit of Heads of State or Government, 1975, Retrieved 5 November 2025, <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>

3 The Economist, A chronicle of heroism in the Soviet Union, Apr 8th 2020, Retrieved 7 November 2025, <https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2020/04/08/a-chronicle-of-heroism-in-the-soviet-union>

4 Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc. The Dictators Who Want to Run the World*, New York: Doubleday, 2024, p. 100

5 Vaclav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless”, 1978, Retrieved 29 October 2025, <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf>, p. 6

1976⁶. It was the largest and most repressed Helsinki Group in the USSR. Apart from assessing human rights information from OSCE member states, the Helsinki Committees acted as a hub, sharing that material with governments, international organisations, journalists, and the general public.

The Helsinki Committees established in Ukraine and Russia became the first human rights organisations in the modern sense of this term. They remain relevant even after the fall of the Iron Curtain and have evolved into world-class human rights NGOs, such as Helsinki Watch, which later became Human Rights Watch.

Ultimately, the Helsinki movement has always insisted that human rights, the rule of law, and democracy — the human dimension of security — are not merely topics for discussion among states, but vital concerns that affect everyone. Despite the turbulent times we face, the opportunity to defend and promote the principles of the Helsinki Final Act remains.

What the Helsinki Principles Mean for Ukrainians Today

Russia's aggression against Ukraine poses an existential threat to human rights and democratic institutions across Europe and the OSCE. So far, discussions of peace and reconstruction have not given human rights the focused attention they require. That must change: human rights are a fundamental basis for peace and democratic security in Ukraine and beyond. Although human rights and peacebuilding are often treated as distinct fields, with the former shaped by norms and values, and the latter by political pragmatism, this separation obscures their essential unity. Human rights and conflict resolution are complementary and mutually reinforcing; efforts to end armed conflict and rebuild societies should integrate the perspectives of both human rights advocates and conflict-resolution practitioners.

Over the past three years, the OSCE has been under pressure since the region has been largely defined by human-rights violations and international crimes linked to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time the rule of law and fundamental freedoms have eroded dramatically in Russia and Belarus, and more recently in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. The adoption of Russia-inspired "Foreign Agents" laws has left human-rights defenders especially exposed, forcing many into exile or to abandon their work. While the decline in rights has been somewhat less abrupt in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, conditions there remain deeply troubling. By contrast, Azerbaijan's recent political realignment and the relatively greater openness to civil-society activity in Moldova, Armenia and Ukraine offer positive trends and strategic opportunities.

Although the OSCE consensus rule has limited the OSCE's effectiveness, the organisation can still do important work. For example, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in documents war crimes in Ukraine as the secretariat of the Moscow Mechanism.⁷ Established in 1991, the mechanism permits one or more participating States to request that ODIHR inquire whether another participating State will invite a mission of experts to examine a clearly defined human dimension question on its territory.

6 Formally known as the Ukrainian Public Group to Promote Compliance with the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

7 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Moscow Mechanism experts present report on Ukraine to OSCE Permanent Council, 2025, Retrieved 31 October 2025, <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/598057>

The latest report was presented to the OSCE Permanent Council on 25 September.⁸ It examines possible violations and abuses of International Humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity, related to the treatment of Ukrainian Prisoners of War (POWs) by the Russian Federation. With the start of Russia's full-scale aggression in 2022, the OSCE has called for human rights to be placed at the heart of any vision or eventual process for peace in Ukraine. The priority remains to silence the weapons and stop Russia's war of aggression. However, it is essential for Ukraine that the vision does not end there. The ambition must be to shape a just and sustainable peace, safeguarding a future for the people of Europe. The human rights pillar framework exists to underpin peace and promote human flourishing, rooted in principles that should guide the path toward it.

How civil society is helping put commitments into action

It is not only the role of governments to ensure the implementation of OSCE commitments. Just as in the 1970s and 1980s, when Helsinki Committees, human rights organisations and activists emphasised the importance of governments to uphold their commitments, civil society organisations today can also play a crucial role. The Centre for Civil Liberties (CCL) in Ukraine is a good example. For 18 years (since 2007), the Centre has been working to protect people's rights in Ukraine and in the OSCE region and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

As Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine continues, the defence of human rights and international justice has never been more urgent. The Centre for Civil Liberties has played a key role in documenting war crimes, advocating for accountability, and mobilising global support for Ukraine's civil society. Since the full-scale invasion, CCL has expanded its efforts to collect evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, working closely with international institutions to ensure justice for the victims and putting the people first.

Beyond documentation, CCL leads international advocacy efforts, particularly in calling for the creation of a special tribunal to hold Russian leadership accountable for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. The organisation collaborates with institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

For genuine peace or even a sustainable ceasefire, Ukraine's Western allies must consider the human dimension. When you think only about economic benefits, security issues, or geopolitical interests, even if you benefit in the short term, you are only biding your time for a catastrophe in the long term.

Today an intensification of cooperation between OSCE and Ukraine is needed more than ever due to Russia's military and hybrid aggression against the entire European security order and the challenges posed by Russia using war crimes as a method of warfare and the challenges posed by the new US administration, which pursues a more "transactional" approach with very different views on Transatlantic cooperation compared to previous administrations.

Moldova and Georgia also need support to strengthen their resilience against external interference. Both have suffered from Russia's aggression in the past and have territories presently occupied by Russia. The CCL's

8 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Report on Possible Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, Related to the Treatment of Ukrainian POWs by the Russian Federation, 2025, Retrieved 31 October 2025, <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/598042>

mission is to promote human rights, democracy, and solidarity in Ukraine and the Eurasia region, affirming human dignity. Its goal is “to implement the mission, that is, to affirm the values of human rights,” and advocacy is one of the main tools it uses to achieve its goals.

In 2013, the Revolution of Dignity marked the beginning of an important stage for both the country and CCL. The Center launched the “Euromaidan SOS” initiative, uniting thousands of people to provide legal aid and other forms of assistance to protesters persecuted by the Ukrainian authorities.

In 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Centre sent its own mobile teams to document war crimes – becoming the first human rights organisation in the world to do so. Since then, during all these years, CCL has been collecting stories told by people who survived captivity, the families of the victims, as well as those who witnessed war crimes.

The Center for Civil Liberties is actively working to free all illegally imprisoned Ukrainians. One of the most successful examples of the Center’s advocacy work was the #SaveOlegSentsov international campaign. Thousands of people in about 40 countries around the world simultaneously organised demonstrations with a common appeal to their governments to help release Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and other political prisoners. These persistent efforts have borne fruit. After the full-scale Russian invasion, this initiative evolved into the Prisoner’s Voice project, a campaign aimed at the release of all civilian prisoners without any terms and conditions or prisoner exchanges. After all, this is exactly what is guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions.

CCL’s relevance and activities go beyond Ukraine. Since 2022, it has served as the secretariat for the Civic Solidarity Platform, a network of over 90 human rights and civil society organisations spanning from the US to Kazakhstan. Working across countries, it supports local member organisations in promoting and defending human rights. A key aspect of its work is advancing the human rights policy objectives of our network partners. Our partners regularly engage with their governments to advance legislation and policy reforms that safeguard human rights and promote democratic governance. We assist by reinforcing international human rights norms and translating those norms into advocacy for domestic legal change or for international mechanisms that ensure accountability when national systems are ineffective.

We promote the universality of rights, resist the erosion or instrumentalisation of the legal framework, take steps to safeguard international law and justice mechanisms, and focus attention on violations and the responsibilities of perpetrators. More often than not, the problem is rooted in the failure of states to live up to their commitments and responsibilities rather than deficiencies in international law or institutions. In recent years, CCL has observed a clear shift: member organisations are concentrating more on domestic engagement and less on international advocacy. This trend frames our discussion today — in many OSCE countries, the space for domestic advocacy is shrinking or gone. Independent civil society remains and requires support, but its work is often no longer visible in the public sphere. That is why solidarity is so vital.

As of 2014, the CCL-wide network, comprising Ukrainian and international NGOs, active community members, survivors, lawyers, and human rights activists, serves as a bridge between the affected community and various stakeholders, including international specialists and practitioners focused on various forms of support. Despite ongoing pressure and being declared “undesirable” in Russia, the organisation continues its activities,

demonstrating professionalism, independence, and resilience.⁹

In 2024, the Centre for Civil Liberties, together with its partners Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union and Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, responded to incoming requests to support survivors and facilitate access to legal and non-legal services, including advice and information, access to psychosocial support, and referral pathways to legal support, representation, and non-legal social support services.

We aspire to bridge the information gap between victims and survivors of international crimes and available resources, to provide them quicker and more effective access to justice. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, we have plenty of experience in dealing with such cases.

As the war persists, war crimes are committed with alarming frequency, and the number of victims continues to grow. With each passing day, trust and hope among victims diminish, increasing the risk of widespread disillusionment within affected communities toward both international and national mechanisms that are struggling to deliver justice and meaningful redress. Our work aims to restore trust in the international rules-based order and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Furthermore, the CCL's work to educate the public on IHL rules is based on the idea that a sound understanding of the law is essential for effective application and, consequently, for the protection of victims of armed conflicts.

In short, for civil society in Ukraine, the Helsinki Accords are not a legacy of the past. While they were a landmark of European diplomacy, they retain their relevance today. As in the past, the inclusion of civil society within the OSCE framework and the enduring relevance of OSCE human rights commitments, even while they are being egregiously violated, enables non-state actors to press governments to implement the principles of the Helsinki Accords.

What sign would Havel's greengrocer put in the window today? Today, the medium is different. Signalling is done in virtual space, spreading the message faster and further. For civil society, messages are amplified by transnational networks, diasporas, international NGOs and digital platforms. At the same time, authoritarian playbooks have become more sophisticated through legal repression, disinformation, "foreign agent" laws, and economic pressure. Those twin forces, the growing reach of civic voices, and the stronger tools to silence them, make OSCE's cooperation with independent non-state actors not a decorative add-on but a strategic necessity. By standing up for respect for its principles and commitments, the OSCE community can help empower the powerless.

When local activists, victim groups, independent journalists and NGOs can act openly and securely they pierce the façade of imposed narratives in the same way the Solidarity pin unmasked the greengrocer's empty slogan.

A robust OSCE that integrates and protects civil society does more than monitor compliance with commitments; it strengthens the social infrastructure that turns private convictions into public pressure, makes state rhetoric verifiable, and thereby upholds the human-dimension pillar that the Helsinki Final Act

⁹ Both Kyiv based Center for Civil Liberties and international Civic Solidarity Platform are "undesirable" in Russia. Under Russian law, cooperation with such organisations may entail administrative and criminal liability for Russian citizens.

established half a century ago.



Multiple Organ Failure: Lessons Learned About an Oversight Mechanism in Ukraine

Martin Sajdik

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One of the defining activities of the OSCE in recent years was its engagement in Ukraine between 2014 and 2021, both politically and operationally. Paradoxically, both Kyiv and Moscow – for different reasons – regard the OSCE’s involvement as a failure. Some critics even blame the organisation for not preventing the outbreak of war. But as argued in this article, to single out the OSCE, ignores the involvement of other international bodies and frameworks in the conflict settlement efforts. One should therefore rather speak of a multi-organ failure of the international community.

Minsk agreements

One week after President Yanukovich had fled Ukraine from Crimea with Russian help on February 23, 2014, widespread separatist unrest broke out across eastern Ukraine’s Donbas region, with Russian flags omnipresent among the demonstrators. The developments in Ukraine raised particular concerns among OSCE Member Countries. The then Swiss OSCE Presidency reacted swiftly by proposing to set up a OSCE Special Monitoring Mission for Ukraine. On March 21, 2014, less than a month after Yanukovich’s escape, the Swiss initiative was signed off by the OSCE Permanent Council.

On June 6, 2014 Hollande, Merkel, Poroshenko and Putin met on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Normandy Landing, creating an informal meeting format, later known as the “Normandy Four”. Just two days later, another body saw its first light, the Trilateral Contact Group, composed of three sides, Russia, Ukraine and the “Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office for the Trilateral Contact Group and Ukraine” (OSCE SR), serving as a moderator. For the latter position the then OSCE Chairman, Didier Burkhalter, in 2014 not only Foreign Minister but also Head of State of the Swiss Confederation, nominated a compatriot, Heidi Tagliavini, a seasoned diplomat of vast experience in post-Soviet conflicts.

Thanks to her initiative that the Minsk Protocol (officially titled the: “Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group with respect to the joint steps aimed at the implementation of the Peace Plan of the President of Ukraine, P. Poroshenko, and the initiatives of the President of Russia, V. Putin”) was signed in Minsk on September 5, 2014, and became known as “Minsk I”. As the OSCE SR, Tagliavini was also one of the masterminds behind “Minsk II” (officially the: “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”), signed on February 12, 2015.

However, the Package of measures was not the only political document that was adopted in the Belarus capital that day. The leaders of the so-called Normandy Format, Francois Hollande, Angela Merkel, Petro Poroshenko and Vladimir Putin, not only witnessed the signing of this agreement but passed a “Declaration ...in support of the “Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements” themselves, a fact often overlooked in discussions of the Minsk process.

UN Security Council Resolution 2202

The UN Security Council Resolution 2202 of 17 February, 2015 enshrines the political decisions taken in Minsk under the auspices of the host, Belarus longtime ruler, Aleksandr Lukashenko. While Lukashenko himself had posed for photographs with his prominent guests in Minsk, his name does not appear in either of the two documents adopted in his “President Hotel”.

In this resolution the UN Security Council,

“1. *Endorses* the “Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, adopted and signed

in Minsk on 12 February 2015 (Annex I);

2. Welcomes the Declaration by the President of the Russian Federation, the President of Ukraine, the President of the French Republic and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany in support of the “Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, adopted on 12 February 2015 in Minsk (Annex II), and their continuing commitment therein to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements;”

The next two of the overall four operative paragraphs of “2202” read as follows:

“3. Calls on all parties to fully implement the “Package of measures”, including a comprehensive ceasefire as provided for therein;

4. Decides to remain seized of the matter.”

These two soberly worded paragraphs contain elements of key importance for the process to follow:

- the call to fully implement the “Package of measures”, particularly highlighting a “comprehensive ceasefire” only five days after the document had been adopted reflects the – justified - concern that any future implementation attempts be overshadowed by the fact that the stipulation fixed in Art.1 of the “Package of measures” („Immediate and comprehensive ceasefire in certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine and its strict implementation as of 15 February 2015, 12 a.m. local time.”) was not met. There was in fact no such ceasefire on 15 February 2015, 12 a.m. local time. On the contrary, on that very day fierce fighting took place in the battle for the seizure of the strategic railway junction Debaltseve, continuing into 17 February, 2015 and later ended in the humiliating evacuation of the area by the Ukrainian forces.
- the commitment “to remain seized of the matter” was upheld by the UN SC in the months and years to follow. UN SC meetings monitored the developments in eastern Ukraine to which the OSCE SMM Chief Monitor, Ertugrul Apakan, and the author of this article were invited to present their views on the situation on the ground via video link.

The UN SC thus established reviews -avoiding the term “oversight mechanism”- on the basis of its resolution “2202”.

The term “oversight mechanism” features, though, in the “Declaration by the President of the Russian Federation, the President of Ukraine, the President of the French Republic and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany in support of the “Package of measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”; “welcomed”, as noted above, by the UN SR in operative para. 2 of “2202”.

The last paragraph of this Declaration reads, as follows:

“Leaders will remain committed to the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. To this end, they agree to establish an oversight mechanism in the Normandy format which will convene at regular intervals, in principle on the level of senior officials from the foreign ministries.”

The leaders’ declaration neither contained any definition of the “oversight mechanism” nor specified who will be subject to the oversight. In reality this formulation resulted in an “oversight-self-entitlement” by the Normandy Four over the deliberations of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) and its Working Groups – with the subsequent “de facto-benediction” of the UN SC via operative paragraph 2 of Res. 2202 of 17 February, 2015.

Unsurprisingly, the UN SC did not establish an “oversight mechanism” over the Normandy Four, as this would have meant that two Permanent Members of the UN SC might oversee themselves, while simultaneously giv-

ing also other UN SC members the right to exercise an “oversight” over them.

Dialogue despite “Debaltseve”

The aforementioned fall of Debaltseve not only violated Art.1 of the Package of Measures but also put into question its regulations of Art. 2 (disengagement of forces) and 4 (electoral area of local elections) which speak of the “line of the Minsk Memorandum of September 19, 2014” – the delineation between the sides. In reality, this line ceased to exist in view of the considerable territorial losses incurred by Kiev, some 1.600 km², to the Russia backed “separatist forces of eastern Ukraine”.

A Jamestown Foundation Article of February 27, 2015, titled “*The Normandy Format and Ukraine: Doing More Harm Than Good*”, gives an interesting account of the reaction of the members of the Normandy Four to this development:

“The Debaltseve case has particularly embarrassed German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande. They had claimed that Russian President Vladimir Putin had assured them personally that his proxy forces would not attack Debaltseve or other Ukrainian positions. Merkel and Hollande conveyed and underwrote themselves those assurances to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko during the Normandy group’s summit in Minsk...Under that agreement, the ceasefire was to have taken effect on February 15, to be followed by disengagement of forces along new demarcation lines. During the Minsk summit, however, Putin repeatedly and explicitly laid claim to Debaltseve on behalf of the “DPR-LPR.” On how strong a basis had Merkel and Hollande offered their assurances to Poroshenko remains unclear. Poroshenko did appeal to those two leaders to ask Putin to desist (Ukrinform, February 15). On February 14, 15 and 16, Merkel and Hollande jointly appealed to Putin by telephone to “use his influence” on “DPR-LPR” forces to stop their assault (no mention was made of Russia’s military personnel involved) (Bundeskanzlerin.de, February 14–17). On February 17, nevertheless, Putin (while visiting Hungary) publicly encouraged “DPR-LPR” forces to complete the assault (Interfax, February 18). Debaltseve fell on February 18.

Putin gloated over it several times, including on February 23 on Rossiya 1 TV. The following day in Paris, the German and French ministers kept their silence over this fiasco in the Normandy Four meeting (see above).

... it (the meeting; author) showed the limitations on German and French capacity and will to stop Russia’s aggression in Ukraine by means other than political compromises at Ukraine’s expense.”

As reflected in its title the Jamestown account conveys the uneasiness in the US with the Normandy Format in which the superpower from the other side of the Atlantic did not have a place. Yet, it also reveals another facet: despite this fundamental violation of the Package of Measures by the Russia’s proxies – with Putin’s open benediction - three days after its signing France, Germany and Ukraine did not withdraw from the Normandy Format. In the following they focused on the rapid enactment of – at least – the last article (Art. 13) of the Package of Measures concerning the further work of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG):

“Intensify the work of the Trilateral Contact Group including through the establishment of working groups on the implementation of relevant aspects of the Minsk agreements. They will reflect the composition of the Trilateral Contact Group.”

Normandy Four's formal "oversight"

France and Germany safeguarded their "insight" into the future process by securing that the "Political Working Group" be chaired by a Frenchman, the outstanding diplomat Pierre Morel, and the "Economic Working Group" by a German, the former economic advisor of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and former EBRD-President, Thomas Mirow, who left this position after only three months in July 2015. He was succeeded by a former banker with ample experience in the post-Soviet area, Per Fischer. Both Morel and Fischer speak Russian.

The "Security Working Group" came under the helm of the Turkish OSCE SMM Chief Monitor, the top diplomat, Ertugrul Apakan. The "Humanitarian Working Group" went to Toni Frisch from Switzerland, former deputy head of the Swiss Directorate for Development Cooperation. Until June 2015, the TCG itself was chaired, as mentioned above, by another Swiss, Heidi Tagliavini, her official title being "Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson in Office for the Trilateral Contact Group and Ukraine" (OSCE SR).

The Working Groups (WGs) were meant to mirror the composition of the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG). In practice, however, they diverged from the example set by the Trilateral Donbas Group (TDG) from the very beginning, as representatives of the "Donbas separatists" (referred to in the Minsk Package of Measures as "the certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts") were allowed to participate in all WG deliberations from the outset.

The TCG always started its meetings in a purely trilateral format (Ukraine, Russia and the OSCE SR). Later, during the course of the meeting, the TCG would invite the representatives of the "Donbas separatists" to join them, on the basis of a respective joint oral agreement.

Despite constituting a side of the Trilateral ("latus", Latin = side) Contact Group, Russia denied its role as a side. Instead, Russia opted to regard itself as a moderator, helping the "Donbas separatist" to defend their interests in the process. This assertion however is incompatible with a clear and underlying fact: a trilateral format cannot foresee two moderators.

Germany and France were thus represented in the Minsk negotiation fabric through their respective chairs of the Economic and Political WGs. In addition to this, always dispatching one young – and able - diplomat to the "Office of the OSCE SR" in Kiev granted Germany continuous insight into all the deliberations of the Minsk negotiating framework. As the Ukrainian authorities had never extended a separate diplomatic status to the Office of the OSCE SR, its international staff – excluding the OSCE SR him-/herself who were granted an "ad personam - diplomatic status with restricted privileges" - was accredited as members of the respective Kiev embassies of their home countries/EU Mission. In addition, during the first conflict years the German "Auswärtiges Amt" kept regular telephone contact with the OSCE SR, to review the work of the TCG and its WGs as well as to discuss possible new initiatives to promote the implementation of the Minsk Package of Measures.

As the location of the Office of the OSCE SR was in Kiev, his/her personal contacts to Ukrainian authorities connected to the Minsk Negotiating Process were automatically more frequent than to the Russian participants of the TCG with whom interaction was – but for some visits to Moscow two to three times per year – maintained by telephone and email correspondence. Before the beginning of the TCG meetings in Minsk the OSCE SR as a rule held private talks with the heads of the Russian and Ukrainian delegations as well as – if need be – with the representatives of the "Donbas separatists".

Given the Ukrainian opposition against him visiting the "certain areas of the Donetsk and Lugansk Oblasts" the OSCE SR, the author of this article, was unable to travel to this part of eastern Ukraine for the first two years of

his office. With the help of the then Nunzio to Ukraine, Claudio Gugerotti, now Cardinal and Head of the Vatican Dicastery for Eastern Churches, a private visit of the catholic OSCE SR to the catholic communities in the cities of Donetsk and Lugansk could be organized. Kiev tacitly took note of this “unofficial personal activity” of the OSCE SR. The “de facto-authorities” of both Donetsk and Lugansk kept their promises of not making any announcements concerning the OSCE SR presence in the “separatist areas” which helped to build confidence and enabled further visits thereafter. Kiev’s concerns that the OSCE SR’s visits would give room to an “officialization” of the status of the “de facto-authorities” of “certain areas of the Donetsk and Lugansk Oblasts” through visits of the OSCE SR misread his desire to gain as much of an objective picture as possible of the entirety of the conflict area. It was thanks to the constructive approach of Nunzio Gugerotti that a practical and pragmatic middle ground could be found.

The Normandy Four’s formal “oversight”

In spring 2015, parallel to setting up the TCG Working Groups, the Normandy Four established “...an oversight mechanism in the Normandy format ... on the level of senior officials from the foreign ministries”, as foreseen in their Declaration of February 12, 2015.

With the progression of the events, it was solely up to the OSCE SR, without the two other TCG members from Russia and Ukraine, to report to a group of Normandy Four officials when they convened either on the level of “senior officials of the Foreign Ministries” or of the four Foreign Ministers. Neither Russia nor Ukraine was represented by its respective head of delegation at the “oversight mechanism”-meetings. There was a simple logic to this. Both heads of delegation were very prominent former politicians. Boris Gryzlov had been Speaker of the Russian Duma (2003-2011) and Minister of Internal Affairs (2001-2003) as well as Chairman of the country’s ruling party “United Russia”. Gryzlov’s counterpart was Ukraine’s former President and former Prime Minister, Leonid Kuchma (1994-2005 and 1992-1993 respectively). It would have been politically untenable to have these two at the time still leading political personalities of their countries to report to “senior officials from the foreign ministries”.

Russia and Ukraine differed in the coverage of the Minsk talks by their foreign ministries. Whereas the Russian MID was present in the TCG by the Ambassador at large, Azamat Kulmukhametov, a previous Russian Ambassador to Syria, at times together with Alexei Polishchuk, now head of MID’s 2nd Department in charge of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, Ukraine’s Ministerstwo zakordonnych spraw only had Andrii Plakhotniuk covering the “Minsk process”, Ukraine’s current Ambassador to Canada who had not been part of the direct TCG deliberations during the period in which the author served as the TCG moderator.

The Normandy Four “oversight mechanism” – be it on the level of Senior Officials or the Foreign Ministers – thus limited itself to the “oversight” of only a single side of the *Trilateral* Contact Group, of the work of the OSCE, through the OSCE SR and of the SMM Chief Monitor. Under these circumstances any disappointment with the overall TCG performance was directed solely at the OSCE and its representatives. Anything else could not have been expected as neither Russia nor Ukraine would have used the “oversight mechanism” as a stage for critical remarks of one’s own performance.

The OSCE SR was only invited to attend the meetings of and report to the “Senior Officials” and Foreign Ministers of the Normandy Four, not so to the Summit meetings of this Format.

“Oversight” of the OSCE Permanent Council and the UN Security Council

The same picture – only with a wider participation – characterized the quarterly reports in person of the OSCE SR and the SMM Chief Monitor to the OSCE Permanent Council. OSCE Participating Countries tended to solely evaluate the activities of the OSCE representatives, ending their interventions with at times expressions of support for the deliberations of the OSCE SR and the SMM Chief Monitor.

As already noted above the UN SR also “kept seized of the matter” in as much the same way as the OSCE PC. The Permanent Members, France and Russia—who were also part of the Normandy Format and represented in the OSCE PC—did not review their own actions as members of the Normandy Four or, in Russia’s case, as a side to the Trilateral Contact Group. Instead, together with Germany and Ukraine, they limited their discussions to commenting on the OSCE’s work and exchanging mutual criticisms between Ukraine and Russia.

Be it the Normandy Four, the OSCE PC or the UN SC the “oversight mechanisms” focused solely on the work of the OSCE and her - would be - representatives.

To use these fora for a self-reflection by the other actors of the TCG and the Normandy Four on their own performance in implementing the Minsk Agreements, was not on the agenda.

Don’t blame it all on the OSCE

This present article has concentrated on the oversight of the Normandy Four over the TCG and its Working Groups. In practice however, other parallel mechanisms were also in place to follow the developments in eastern Ukraine, namely, the OSCE Permanent Council and the UN Security Council, yet a coordinated interaction between all these august bodies to solve the conflict appeared to be missing.

In current discussions the OSCE, acting through the SMM, the OSCE SR and its Permanent Council tends to be the central focus of criticism for failing to solve the conflict in eastern Ukraine. As stated above however, in reality, other actors too had been involved: the Normandy Four and the UN SC, the latter having de facto approved the Normandy Four’s political oversight of the OSCE endeavors.

When discussing the international community’s inability to solve the conflict in eastern Ukraine, it therefore seems appropriate not to single out the OSCE alone, but rather to speak of a “multi-organ failure” as a multitude of international bodies had been involved.

In each of these bodies – and on the ground – it was Russia that held the role of a key player.

Looking forward

It will be up to the two conflicting sides to decide how and by whom they want to see their ceasefire observed and managed. It is likely that any future ceasefire-line between Russia and Ukraine will probably be at least five times longer than the approximately 420 kilometre “line of contact” that the OSCE SMM monitored in the Donbas. This would be difficult for the OSCE alone to monitor. A peace process of this magnitude may also require a number of different political, operational and technical bodies.

If the OSCE is called up to be involved in monitoring, the sheer size of the task would probably require the organ-

isation to work with others, such as the UN and/or a group of its member states, other regional organizations or sui generis arrangements. This brings the risk of repeating a situation where different actors with different mandates are engaged in a disjointed way. To avoid another “multiple organ failure” by the international community in Ukraine, the OSCE should insist on clearly structured responsibilities between all actors involved. This would contribute to cohesion among all relevant actors and increase the chances of a sustainable peace.





Section 3: New Dimensions

Security and Human Rights Journal

Special Edition: The OSCE at 50

The Parliamentary Dimension of the OSCE

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Abstract

This article explores the parliamentary dimension of the OSCE. As an independent organization the Parliamentary Assembly of the OSCE facilitates inter-parliamentary dialogue and advances the OSCE's goals of security and co-operation in its region. Parliamentary diplomacy, dialogue and election observation are the main tools the Parliamentary Assembly uses to implement the Helsinki Final Act's principles. With war, conflict and backsliding of democracy in the region the work of the Parliamentary Assembly is more important than ever.

Introduction

From the establishment of the OSCE¹ in 1975, the organization functioned without a parliamentary dimension for 16 years. The role of parliamentarians was only officially recognized in the 1990 Charter of Paris, which called for greater parliamentary involvement in the organization.² This wish for greater involvement was quickly realized, as the Parliamentary Assembly (PA) was established the following year by the Madrid Document.³ The PA was to bring plurality and promote the participation of national parliaments to the work of the OSCE – a goal it has successfully achieved. Since its establishment, the PA has grown from its original 245 parliamentarians from 34 parliaments to the current 323 parliamentarians from 56 parliaments⁴ and continues to promote its core values from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The PA also has 11 Partners for Co-operation.⁵

From its first moments to today, the PA has offered an effective platform for parliamentary diplomacy. It is through dialogue that the OSCE and its PA aim to prevent conflicts before they arise and resolve existing conflicts. Russia's brutal attack on Ukraine has notably challenged the very basis upon which the OSCE has been built. The full-scale war has been repeatedly condemned by the PA and calls for sustainable peace and accountability have been constant.

The PA also supports and strengthens democratic institutions within its region through dialogue and election observation missions. By co-operation between the governmental and parliamentary side of the OSCE, the PA supports the implementation of OSCE objectives in its participating States through current and new challenges.

Parliamentary diplomacy and dialogue as a means to peace

The most notable strength of the OSCE PA lies in parliamentary diplomacy. While parliamentary diplomacy has no global definition there is a common understanding that it promotes dialogue, builds confidence and fosters mutual understanding in addition to acting as a catalyst for conversations and decision-making in

1 Then known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE).

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Charter of Paris for New Europe, 21 November 1990, pp. 12-13, Retrieved 18 March 2025, <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>.

3 OSCE, The Madrid Document, 3 April 1991. Retrieved 18 March 2025, <https://www.osce.org/pa/40791>.

4 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), Member Countries. Retrieved 11 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/member-countries>.

5 OSCE PA, Partners for Co-operation. Retrieved 11 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/partners-for-co-operation>.

international relations.⁶ Parliamentary diplomacy therefore offers a unique avenue to bridge divides, build trust and strengthen co-operation. It provides more freedom regarding topics to be discussed compared to governmental platforms, allowing parliamentarians to broaden the scope of dialogue on international relations. Dialogue is not only concentrated to parliamentary sessions but is also present outside the statutory meetings, for example in the meetings of the PA's ad hoc Committees and in international events and conferences organized by the parliaments of the participating States. It is through the connections built and conversations held that the work of the PA becomes even more effective.

Through parliamentary diplomacy the PA can offer an effective platform for venting and preventing tensions, fostering co-operation and reinforcing security where it is most needed. The parliamentarians of the PA play a vital role in bringing the principles of the OSCE to life, through election observation, field visits, mediation and advocacy but also by promoting the OSCE's core values and work in their own countries.

Parliamentary diplomacy is a part of the PA's everyday work. There has been a growing uncertainty in the OSCE region in the past few years due to a full-scale war, conflict and threats to democracy. In addition to Russia's war against Ukraine, the PA has utilized its tools to provide a platform for discussions in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in Georgia following the 2024 parliamentary elections. Although not directly in the OSCE region,⁷ the PA has used parliamentary diplomacy even in discussions with Israeli and Palestinian authorities since the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine – a case example on the OSCE PA approach to conflict

The OSCE Helsinki Final Act adopted 50 years ago includes the core principles guiding the relations between participating States. Refraining from the use of force, territorial integrity of States and respect for human rights amongst others have all been inscribed in the document.⁸ In February 2022 those principles were grossly violated, when Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine. This war changed the European security situation overnight and had a major impact on the functioning of the PA as well. Since the start of the war the PA has remained strong in its support to Ukraine. The PA condemned the actions of the Russian Federation, but unlike the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe,⁹ the PA did not suspend it from the organization, due to a lack of consensus and viable mechanisms to do so, following from the organization's founding idea of inclusion.

In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, the PA condemned the annexation¹⁰ but decided to conduct special

6 Durbek Sayfullaev, 'Parliamentary Diplomacy in Making of Foreign Policy', in the *Advanced Science Journal*, 2016, Issue 1, pp. 52-54; Andrea Gawrich, 'A Bridge with Russia? The Parliamentary Assemblies of the OSCE and of the Council of Europe in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis', in Stelios Stavridis and Davor Jancic (eds.), *Parliamentary Diplomacy in European and Global Governance*, Brill & Nijhoff, Leiden, 2017, pp. 156-173.

7 Israel is a Partner for Co-operation in the OSCE: OSCE PA, Partners for Co-operation. Retrieved 2 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/members/partners-for-co-operation>.

8 OSCE, Helsinki Final Act, 1 August 1975. Retrieved 31 March 2025, [Helsinki Final Act | OSCE](https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act).

9 Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), 'The Russian Federation can no longer be a member State of the Council of Europe, PACE says', 15 March 2022. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8638/the-russian-federation-can-no-longer-be-a-member-state-of-the-council-of-europe-pace-says>.

10 OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), 'OSCE parliamentarians approve Russia resolution amid debate on Ukraine', 1 July 2014. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2014/osce-parliamentarians-approve-russia-resolution-amid-debate-on-ukraine>.

dialogue meetings between the Russian and Ukrainian parliamentarians. These meetings are one of the clearest examples of parliamentary diplomacy: an international institution provided the opportunity for bilateral dialogue between representatives of the two parties to the conflict in order to resolve the dispute.¹¹

To this day, the PA continues to support the government, civil society and people of Ukraine as they continue to face the immense challenges brought on by Russia's ongoing war. In 2023 the PA established the Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine to further consolidate the PA's practical and political efforts in support of Ukraine.¹² It also appointed three Special Rapporteurs focusing on different aspects of support for Ukraine and bringing in first-hand information to the PA.¹³ The parliamentarians of the assembly keep Ukraine at the forefront of the conversations and meetings. In addition to the unwavering support for Ukraine, and despite the Russian delegation's current decision not to participate in the PA meetings, the PA keeps the door open for Russian parliamentarians to join the conversation and resolve the war in accordance with the Helsinki Principles – through peaceful settlement of disputes. Even though keeping the door open for Russian participation may be an uncommon approach, it is a testimony to the PA's dedication to dialogue and parliamentary diplomacy.

Since the OSCE Ministerial Council's decision-making is based on consensus,¹⁴ the decision-making on the governmental side has been heavily impeded by the war in Ukraine. The main decision-making body of the OSCE PA, however, has a bit more room for manoeuvre due to its parliamentary nature, giving it more freedom in decision-making. For example, unlike the OSCE, the PA has been able to agree on and adopt a budget, ensuring that its work can continue effectively. The PA has been able to officially adopt declarations and resolutions condemning Russia's war against Ukraine. This has enabled the PA to take a stronger stand than its governmental counterpart and actively continue its institutional work towards peace in Ukraine.

Election observation missions as a key tool for strengthening democracy

In addition to parliamentary diplomacy, election observation missions (EOM) remain one of the most important and visible tools in the PA's toolkit for supporting and strengthening democratic institutions within the OSCE region. The parliamentarians of the PA play an important role during election day observation, monitoring the conduct of the election. EOMs also bring international visibility to the election processes, which is especially relevant in elections that are not as democratic and fair as they ought to be according to the OSCE's commitments.

The PA is deeply committed to its EOMs. EOMs are organized in cooperation with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). ODIHR is responsible for the long-term observation, assessing the entire electoral process whereas the OSCE PA contributes to short-term observation, especially

11 Gawrich (n 6), p. 169.

12 OSCE PA, 'OSCE parliamentarians meet in Vancouver for Annual Session, establishing a new parliamentary working group on Ukraine', 30 June 2023. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2023/osce-parliamentarians-meet-in-vancouver-for-annual-session-establish-new-parliamentary-working-group-on-ukraine>.

13 OSCE-PA, 'Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine'. Retrieved 31 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/activities/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ukraine>.

14 OSCE, Rules of Procedure of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2006, Part II A(2-3). Retrieved 2 April 2025, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/0/22775.pdf>.

on election day.¹⁵ The cooperation combines ODIHR's technical expertise with the political insight of elected parliamentarians. For example, in 2024 the PA, in co-operation with ODIHR, deployed eight EOMs to six different participating States. Hundreds of parliamentarians participated in the missions, and the PA even deployed its largest mission ever to the United States of America, with a total of 167 observers.¹⁶ The EOMs can provide a platform for successful co-operation even for parliamentarians from two countries in conflict. For example, in the 2024 EOM in Uzbekistan the Head of OSCE PA delegation was the Head of the Armenian delegation to the OSCE PA while the role of Special Co-ordinator was held by the Head of the Azerbaijani delegation to the OSCE PA.¹⁷ At the time of writing the PA plans to observe elections in Albania and Moldova in the first half of 2025, continuing its active efforts in ensuring democratic elections. In addition to cooperating with ODIHR, the PA has an important role to coordinate EOMs with other observing institutions, such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.¹⁸

The PA's work is not done after the elections. The PA consistently advocates for the importance of addressing the concerns highlighted in its joint statements with ODIHR with all relevant stakeholders. It assesses and encourages the implementation of its recommendations. Countries are not left alone to deal with the recommendations after the observation mission has concluded. Instead, the PA offers long-term support, including follow-up visits with ODIHR. In addition to supporting democratic processes, the long-term work on elections aims to strengthen public trust in the electoral processes. OSCE PA and ODIHR observers often engage in cooperation and information exchange with domestic observers, sharing expertise on electoral processes and gaining local insight. The observing organizations, along with the OSCE PA, also need to make sure that their methods of observation stay up to date to respond to new ways of election interference, such as disinformation, emphasized by social media, and deep fakes.

New challenges in the OSCE region

The OSCE region faces pressing and evolving new challenges. At the core of the OSCE's mission is the belief that security is best achieved through dialogue, mediation and co-operation. However, the challenges of today go well beyond what the Helsinki Final Act signatories could have foreseen 50 years ago. The scope of disinformation and the increased questioning of democratic procedures such as elections are destabilizing democracies in an unforeseen way. Simultaneously, cyberattacks, abusing critical infrastructure vulnerabilities and weaponizing migration are more and more common.

The impacts of climate change are becoming more severe, exacerbating resource scarcity and displacement, and therefore directly affecting the stability of the OSCE region. Artificial intelligence is reshaping security – from cyberattacks to new forms of armed warfare and easily spreading disinformation to offering

15 OSCE, Co-operation Agreement Between the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. 2 September 1997. Retrieved 27 June 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/ru/dokumenty/election-observation/election-observation-reports/documents/1603-osce-co-operation-agreement-1997/file>.

16 OSCE PA, 2024 Election Observation Annual Report, p. 1, 2024. Retrieved 27 March 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-reports/brochures/5136-osce-pa-election-observation-overview-2023-1/file>.

17 OSCE PA, International Election Observation Mission Uzbekistan – Parliamentary Elections, 27 October 2024, p. 18. Retrieved 17 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/election-observation/election-observation-statements/uzbekistan/statements-31/5102-2024-parliamentary-4/file>.

18 OSCE PA, How observation works. Retrieved 4 April 2025, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/activities/election-observation/how-observation-works>.

opportunities. The erosion of trust in multilateral institutions and diplomacy has become more and more evident in recent years, challenging the effectiveness of such institutions' work.

These challenges need to be addressed head on, as they will only amplify existing challenges, and complicate co-operation amongst participating States. The PA will need to adopt policy changes, ensure coordinated responses, promote best practices and deliver practical solutions to tackle new challenges. Participating parliamentarians should bring the message of the PA to their national parliaments and executive authorities to ensure a more effective response.

Conclusions

The OSCE PA plays a vital role in interparliamentary co-operation in the field of security and human rights. Its dedication to parliamentary diplomacy, dialogue and peaceful settlement of disputes will not perish despite the current and new challenges in its area. In a time of increasing uncertainty, parliamentary diplomacy should be further strengthened, as it can truly make a difference. OSCE PA members are uniquely positioned to promote the OSCE values in their national parliaments and raising the organization's profile through their own work. In addition to condemning actions that go against the Helsinki Principles and adopting resolutions, the PA should actively engage in dialogue from early on instead of isolating those it disagrees with. It should find ways to bring countries together to achieve peace. Furthermore, the PA's work has to continue after peace is reached, playing a role in upholding peace and stability in the OSCE region. The OSCE should make better use of the PA's tools, and the two sides of the organization should increase their co-operation to further improve the OSCE's effectiveness. Even 50 years after their adoption, the Helsinki Principles are as current as ever and the PA will continue its important work to support, promote and advocate for their realization.

European Security in Flux: The OSCE's First Dimension from Détente to Disruption (1975–2025)

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Abstract

The article looks at the history and enduring relevance of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)'s First Dimension, which covers politico-military issues. Tracing the evolution from the Cold War period to the current rupture, it argues that while cooperative security has yielded to deterrence, the Helsinki Final Act's normative infrastructure remains essential for managing risk and preventing escalation. The analysis advocates a pragmatic shift toward basic risk reduction, leveraging the OSCE's "soft" assets and adapting existing instruments—such as the Vienna Document—to address emerging technologies for example armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Ultimately, preserving the OSCE acquis provides vital tools for navigating confrontation while safeguarding the foundations for future stability.

Introduction

As the Helsinki Final Act (HFA) approached its 50th anniversary in 2025, the contrast between its foundational promise of cooperative security and the current geopolitical reality could not be starker. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represents more than a violation of international norms. It has shattered the very premises and the legacy of cooperative security built over five decades. This article directly interrogates that dilemma by tracing the evolution of the OSCE's First Dimension (the politico-military dimension) across six distinct historical phases, moving from the origins of Cold War détente to the current era of systemic rupture.

The analysis begins with the détente phase of the Cold War (1975–1990), a period defined by the Helsinki Final Act and the Stockholm (1986) and Vienna (1990) Documents, where foundational Confidence and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) proved resilient enough to endure superpower antagonism and lay the groundwork for a more robust regime.

It then flows into the pivotal post-Cold War transformation phase (1990–1995), an era defined by the "Europe whole and free" maxim, the Charter of Paris, the establishment of the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC), and the birth of a comprehensive arms control architecture, including the adaptation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). The subsequent consolidation phase (1996–2001) marks the peak of the cooperative model, culminating in the Istanbul Summit (1999) and efforts to modernise the acquis, even as the first geopolitical strains, such as the NATO enlargement and the Kosovo intervention, began to test the consensus principle.

The narrative arc turns downward in the 2000s, a period of renewed contestation where fault lines deepened over NATO enlargement and the erosion of arms control commitments. This slow decay was violently accelerated by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and cemented by the paradigm shift of 2022. The current reality is a suspension of core 1st dimension instruments and the paralysis of the OSCE consensus model.

Despite this bleak trajectory, this article argues that institutional breakdown does not equate to normative obsolescence. In a deterrence-dominated environment characterised by high military risk and zero trust, the HFA's core logic of managing risk through transparency, predictability, and restraint becomes more essential, not less. While a return to cooperative politics is currently very unlikely, the Helsinki principles endure as a necessary common vocabulary for preventing uncontrolled escalation in an era of confrontation. Moreover, the OSCE must quietly prepare the ground for a future reset—whether through potential roles in a peace settlement in Ukraine or by addressing technological threats that the war has accelerated. The proliferation of

UAVs, in particular, amplifies risks of hybrid warfare and civilian harm.

Cold War Context: Defence and Détente

As the Helsinki Final Act reached its 50th anniversary in 2025, Europe faced a security landscape defined increasingly by confrontation. The security-related principles enshrined in Helsinki were conceived to stabilise relations between adversarial blocs during the Cold War.¹ Even in a deterrence-driven environment like today, they continue to provide essential reference points for restraint, risk management, and crisis prevention.

Historical experience provides valuable guidance. In the early 1980s, amid the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, martial law in Poland, and an intensifying nuclear arms race—the OSCE managed to preserve a constructive East-West dialogue through the Madrid process, anchored in the HFA. This period marked a strategic inflexion point for the OSCE: the 1st dimension gained prominence and paved the way for the Stockholm CSBM process, even within the constraints of the Cold War. The Helsinki (1975) and Madrid (1980–1983) meetings introduced the first generation of CBMs, focused on transparency, information exchange, and basic consultation procedures. Stockholm then transformed these into second-generation CSBMs, adding on-site verification, strengthened political commitments, annual calendars of military activities, exercise constraints, and inspection mechanisms—significant qualitative advances that elevated cooperative security into a more structured and operational domain.

Emboldened by renewed detente following Gorbachev’s rise to power, the Stockholm agreements laid the groundwork for subsequent landmark treaties and commitments, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF, 1987), the Vienna Document (1990), the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe treaty (CFE), and the 2+4 German reunification treaty.

During this detente period, arms control and CSBMs were closely intertwined with geopolitical developments. Gorbachev’s acceptance of mandatory inspections on Soviet territory marked a decisive shift in Soviet security policy and enabled the intrusive verification mechanisms that would underpin the post-Cold War arms control architecture.

The advancement of security cooperation across the East–West divide was largely driven by the diplomatic character of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Its model of *conference diplomacy*, a deliberately non-institutionalised and slow process operating outside military alliances offered the flexibility and multilateral legitimacy needed to bridge Cold War divisions.

The CSCE’s light institutional footprint enabled it to multilateralise East–West relations by shifting key exchanges beyond Soviet–American bilateral channels and also empowered smaller European states, particularly the neutral and non-aligned countries (N+N), to contribute to European security. The HFA redefined security comprehensively through its “three baskets,” embedding political, military, economic, environmental, and human-dimension issues within a single framework. The 1st Dimension gained traction precisely because it was integrated into this comprehensive concept, rather than treated in isolation. Ultimately, the CSCE’s strength lay in its nature as a flexible diplomatic process rather than a fixed, rigid organisation, which enabled major breakthroughs before its formal institutionalisation as the OSCE in 1995.

1 Sovereign equality, territorial integrity, peaceful dispute settlement, restraint, transparency, and predictability

Post-Cold War Transformation and the Charter of Paris for a New Europe (1990)

The end of the Cold War ushered in a fundamental reordering of the European security landscape. Building on the principles of the HFA, the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe captured this historic shift. European security was redefined as “whole and free,” replacing confrontation with a vision of cooperative security rooted in shared values, democratic governance, and peaceful dialogue.²

With the reunification of Germany and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the CSCE started to actively assist former communist countries in their transformation towards democratic governance and stability. Concurrently, NATO expanded its role to include out-of-area crisis management, notably in response to the Balkan wars of the 1990s. The Paris Charter reaffirmed commitments to military transparency, democratic governance, and arms control, while a series of East-West agreements laid the foundation for a rules-based European security order.³

The end of the Cold War left Europe with a vast surplus of conventional weapons, creating both an opportunity and an imperative for cooperative arms control and disarmament. Within this context, the CFE treaty introduced legally binding national ceilings on key categories of military equipment, aiming to reduce the risk of surprise attacks and large-scale offensives.⁴

In parallel, the Vienna Document emerged as a central pillar of the OSCE's politico-military dimension, establishing a CSBM regime built on transparency, regular military information exchanges, advance notifications, and on-site inspections and visits. These instruments considerably strengthened mutual trust and predictability, reducing the risk of miscalculation and escalation. Through revisions, the Document was adapted to reflect the evolving security environment. However, subsequent efforts to modernise it after 2011, particularly to strengthen verification mechanisms and better integrate it with the OSCE's conflict-prevention and crisis-response toolkit under the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC), ultimately stalled due to lack of consensus.⁵

Institutionalising the 1st Dimension: The Forum for Security Cooperation

The 1990s offered a historic window of opportunity for shaping a peaceful, democratic, and integrated Europe. The dissolution of ideological blocs unleashed a surge of optimism, famously encapsulated by ideas like ‘The End of History,’ demonstrating an unwavering belief in the triumph of liberal democracy and the promise of cooperative security.⁶ The 1992 Helsinki Summit marked a critical point as it translated post-Cold War

2 President Bush, ‘A Europe Whole and Free,’ Remarks to the Citizens in Mainz, by President George Bush, 31 May, 1989.

3 2+4 Agreement (1990) – German unification

CFE Treaty (1990) – Eliminating offensive military capacities

Vienna Document (1990, 1992, 1994, 1999, 2011) – CSBMs and verification framework

Open Skies Treaty (1992) – Aerial verification and transparency

NATO–Russia Founding Act (1997)- formal partnership aimed at overcoming Cold War antagonism.

4 For details see: A. J. K. Bailes, and I. Anthony. ‘Military Legacies of the Cold War in Europe: The General Challenge,’ In *Relics of Cold War: Europe's Challenge, Ukraine's Experience*, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 6, pp. 1–34.

5 Food for Thought Paper and Proposal for a VD Plus Draft Decision Risk Reduction (Chapter III) Improved Mechanism for Consultation and Co-operation as regards Unusual Military Activities (Article 16), OSCE Germany 2016 (unpublished).

6 Fukuyama, Francis. ‘The End of History,’ *The National Interest*, no. 16, Summer 1989, pp. 3–18.

aspirations into institutional and operational commitments, driving the transformation of the CSCE into the OSCE.

As part of this institutionalisation process, the Forum for Security Cooperation (FSC) was established to address politico-military security issues. As one of the OSCE's two main decision-making bodies, alongside the Permanent Council, the FSC adopts consensus-based, politically binding decisions and fosters dialogue through regular Security Dialogues and two dedicated Working Groups.⁷ The FSC's scope eventually also included normative frameworks and practical projects on Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW), Stockpiles of Conventional Ammunition, and mine action, broadening the OSCE's arms control regime.

Another key achievement of the FSC, and arguably the most significant one, is the 1994 Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security. This was the first agreement to set out intra-state commitments regarding security governance and the democratic control of armed forces. It introduced norms for civilian oversight, military professionalism, and transparency through annual exchanges and peer dialogue. Particularly impactful in post-Communist states, the Code institutionalised accountability and remained a cornerstone of the OSCE's cooperative security framework, promoting responsible security governance and contributing to conflict prevention across the Euro-Atlantic area.⁸

Consolidating the Arms Control Regime: The 1996 Lisbon Document

The 1996 Lisbon Document marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of the OSCE's politico-military dimension, as it completed the institutional framework for arms control and cooperative security. It emerged in a changing geopolitical environment where traditional realist paradigms, focused on alliances, deterrence, military balances and spheres of influence, were no longer sufficient to explain post-Cold War security dynamics. In response, the Lisbon Document articulated a common and comprehensive security model, grounded in co-operative security, the indivisibility of security, shared democratic values and transparency, thereby redefining the strategic foundations of European security for the post-bipolar era.⁹

While the envisioned cooperative security model remained an aspiration, a central achievement of this era was the formal adoption of the Framework for Arms Control. This politically binding document effectively integrated the three core pillars of Europe's conventional arms control regime: the CFE Treaty (setting limitations on conventional arms), the Vienna Document (establishing CSBMs and transparency measures), and the Open Skies Treaty (enabling mutual aerial observation). This trilogy reflected a comprehensive and cooperative approach to security, embedding arms control within a broader vision of inclusive and collective security.

The 1996 Lisbon Document significantly solidified the OSCE's role across the full conflict cycle. It reinforced the established connection between arms control and conflict prevention while simultaneously broadening the

⁷ Loïc. Simonet, *The OSCE Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC): Thirty Years of Politico-Military Acquis and Contribution to Transparency and Confidence-Building in the Euro-Atlantic Region, 1992–2022*, Austrian Institute for International Affairs (OIIA), Vienna, October 2022.

⁸ Victor-Yves Ghebali And Alexander Lambert, *The OSCE Code Of Conduct On Politico-Military Aspects of Security Anatomy And Implementation*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers Leiden / Boston, 2005.

⁹ Lisbon Declaration on a Common and Comprehensive Security Model for Europe for The Twenty-First Century, Lisbon Document 1996, p. 10, Lisbon, OSCE.

scope of the 1st Dimension (the politico-military sphere) to explicitly include post-conflict reconstruction. This holistic approach was deemed particularly essential in volatile settings like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria. In this way, the document elevated arms control from a mere preventative tool to a fundamental basis for stabilisation and recovery in post-conflict environments.

Adapting to a Changing Security Landscape

In response to violent conflicts in the former Soviet Union and the Western Balkans in the early 1990s, the OSCE sought to enhance its tools for the conflict cycle. For this purpose, the 1999 Istanbul Summit prepared the normative and operational grounds by adopting the Charter for European Security. This new framework emphasised cooperative, comprehensive and indivisible security, and set out concrete obligations, primarily for the Russian Federation, regarding the reduction, withdrawal, or destruction of military forces and equipment stationed outside its national territory, particularly in Georgia and Moldova. Furthermore, at the same period, the escalation of armed violence in Kosovo turned into a major test for the OSCE's first dimension, as the Kosovo Verification Mission (1998–1999) showed both the potential and limits of OSCE crisis-monitoring and early warning.¹⁰ Its failure to stop escalation underscored the need for stronger politico-military instruments and helped shape later first-dimension tools, including post-conflict institution-building under the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).¹¹

NATO's enlargements in 1999 and 2004, combined with U.S. missile defence initiatives and a series of "colour revolutions," heightened geopolitical sensitivities. Tensions further escalated when Russia suspended its commitments to the CFE Treaty in 2007, and the 2008 NATO Bucharest Summit signalled that Ukraine and Georgia could join the Alliance. These developments deepened divisions and culminated in the Russia-Georgia war later that year.

In 2010, the OSCE attempted to reset dialogue at the Astana Summit. The Astana Commemorative Declaration reaffirmed core principles from Helsinki and Paris, emphasising that States have equal rights, including the right to choose their alliances. The Summit fell short of delivering actionable outcomes. It reflected a moment of potential that ultimately went unrealised as cooperative security deteriorated further after the meeting.¹²

From Norm-Building to Operational Crisis Management

In the post-Cold War era, the OSCE underwent a significant operational shift, moving from its original mandate of norm-building and stabilising the broader European security order toward managing active conflicts and supporting post-conflict recovery. As violent conflicts erupted across the former Soviet Union and the Western Balkans in the 1990s, the organisation was compelled to rapidly reorient its focus toward crisis response. It took on crucial mediation and monitoring roles in protracted conflicts, including those in Moldova (since 1993), Georgia (since 2008), Nagorno-Karabakh (1992–2020), and Ukraine (2014–2022). Furthermore, in the Western Balkans, the OSCE proved instrumental in implementing key elements of the Dayton Peace Agreement, particularly through coordinating arms control, supporting institution-building,

10 Robert L. Barry *After the Bombing: The OSCE in the Aftermath of the Kosovo Crisis*, OSCE Yearbook, 1999, pp.49-58.

11 Matthias Niedobitek, *The OSCE and Kosovo*, in *Kosovo and International Law*, Edited by Peter Hilpold, Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, pp. 139-156

12 Farkhard Sharip, *Astana OSCE Summit Ends in Division*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, Jamestown, Vol. 7, Issue 223, 14. December 2010.

and undertaking human rights monitoring.¹³ This operational evolution, confirming the organisation’s role across the full spectrum of security challenges, was formally institutionalised through Ministerial Decision 3/11 in 2011, which officially embraced and formalised the OSCE’s conflict cycle approach.¹⁴ It introduced a comprehensive framework for early warning, early action, dialogue facilitation, mediation support, and post-conflict rehabilitation. This marked the first political consensus among participating States to equip and operationalise the OSCE’s conflict cycle toolbox of the OSCE Secretariat and its Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC).¹⁵

Decision 3/11 strengthened the role of the CPC, empowering it to deploy rapid response teams, support special representatives, and coordinate field missions. In this context, the CPC established a Mediation Support Team, offering training, strategy workshops, and toolkits—particularly on inclusive mediation in cooperation with the OSCE Gender Section.¹⁶ The Team has supported the Trilateral Contact Group in Ukraine, the Geneva International Discussions for Georgia, and the Transnistrian Settlement Process. The CPC also expanded Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R) efforts, aligning with broader OSCE partnerships, particularly with the UN and EU.¹⁷

Transnational Risks and Threats

Since the terror attacks of 9/11, the OSCE has significantly expanded its focus in the 1st dimension beyond traditional politico-military issues to address transnational threats such as terrorism, organised crime, cyber threats, trafficking in human beings, and violent extremism. To coordinate cross-dimensional responses, the OSCE established the Transnational Threats Department (TNTD) in 2012, working closely with field operations, participating States, and international partners.

The OSCE launched Cyber/ICT Confidence-Building Measures in 2013 to enhance transparency, reduce misperceptions, and strengthen crisis communication. These CBMs were supported by regional trainings, implementation roadmaps, and information sharing through the OSCE Communication Network to improve cyber resilience.

The OSCE also supported arms control efforts by helping post-conflict countries secure or destroy small arms and light weapons (SALW), while promoting implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 to prevent WMD proliferation to non-state actors through stronger legislation and border controls.

13 Under the Dayton Peace Agreement, the OSCE was mandated to implement several annexes—most prominently Annex 1-B on regional arms control (Articles II–IV), which included weapons limitations, CSBMs, and sub-regional arms control.

14 Decision No. 3/11 Elements of The Conflict Cycle, Related To Enhancing The Osce’s Capabilities In Early Warning, Early Action, Dialogue Facilitation And Mediation Support, And Post-Conflict Rehabilitation

15 Raith, Michael. “Addressing the Conflict Cycle: The OSCE’s Evolving Toolbox.” In OSCE Insights 2020, pp. 43–58. Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2020

16 Inclusion of Women and Effective Peace Processes: A Toolkit, OSCE, 2019 https://www.osce.org/secretariat/440735?utm_source=chatgpt.com

17 OSCE Secretariat. The OSCE Approach to Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R): Report by the Secretary General of the OSCE. Vienna: Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 20 March 2019.

From Stagnation to Breakdown

The erosion of key arms control frameworks, marked notably by Russia's suspension of the CFE treaty in 2007 and the United States' withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020, revealed how fragile cooperative security had become in an era of renewed geopolitical rivalry. As conventional arms control mechanisms eroded, the OSCE remained one of the few multilateral platforms capable of maintaining the potential for mitigating military risks through dialogue and CSBMs.

The 2011 update of the Vienna Document aimed to modernise CSBMs, but implementation faced mounting challenges, particularly amid the East-West confrontation triggered by Russia's interventions in Ukraine. Western states accused Russia of evading notification requirements by fragmenting large-scale exercises into smaller, unreportable manoeuvres and using unannounced snap exercises to bypass transparency commitments.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Vienna Document remained relevant before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, notably through Chapter III, paragraph 16 on consultations over unusual military activities. Days before the invasion, Russia rejected inspection requests and refused mandatory meetings, breaching key commitments and weakening the OSCE's crisis prevention role.¹⁹

Regarding conflict prevention and crisis management, the OSCE was able to deploy key instruments from its toolbox in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of armed violence in the Donbas. In response to escalating tensions, the Swiss OSCE Chair played a pivotal role in establishing the Trilateral Contact Group in 2014. This group brought together representatives from Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE to facilitate dialogue and de-escalation across Ukraine. The Swiss OSCE Chair also negotiated the mandate and initiated the deployment of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, which quickly became a central pillar of the OSCE's operational presence on the ground.²⁰ The mission became a pioneer in the operational use of drones and other surveillance technologies, setting new standards for monitoring and verification in conflict settings.

Despite early cautious optimism, the Minsk Agreements of 2014 and 2015 did not achieve lasting peace. Persistent ceasefire violations, the absence of enforcement and accountability mechanisms, and limited political will prevented meaningful implementation. The failure of the Minsk Agreements created negative narratives that constrain future OSCE efforts to pursue a peaceful solution to Russia's war against Ukraine.

Cooperative security has been seriously affected during the post-2014 period, and as traditional security tools stalled, the OSCE shifted its focus to non-traditional threats where consensus remained possible. The 2016 launch of the Structured Dialogue created a new forum for discussing risk reduction, arms control and hybrid threats, despite political gridlock. While divergent views limited its scope, it allowed continued informal dialogue on pressing pan-European security concerns. In 2021, the OSCE achieved a rare Ministerial Council consensus on addressing climate-related security risks, with a focus on regional cooperation, adaptation, and

18 Gabriela Iveliz Rosa Hernández, "Whither Conventional Arms Control in Europe?," in OSCE Insights, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2024), p113. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748917366-08>

19 Op.cit. p.114.

20 "A Peaceful Presence: The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine", OSCE, 2021.

environmental diplomacy, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Central Asia. This example underscored the OSCE's value as a flexible, established platform for addressing complex transnational challenges, such as environmental degradation, migration, and counter-terrorism. These transnational challenges fundamentally transcend antagonistic positions and require consensus-based cooperation across all participating States, irrespective of the current geopolitical climate.

Conclusion: Safeguarding the Acquis in an Age of Deterrence and Technological Disruption

As the Helsinki Final Act marks its 50th anniversary, the security architecture it helped establish stands deeply eroded. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has produced a geopolitical rupture, suspended crisis-management mechanisms, and undermined the trust required for consensus-based diplomacy. The cooperative security paradigm has been displaced by a deterrence-driven landscape, offering little prospect for a rapid restoration of crisis management and conventional arms control.

Yet institutional paralysis does not make the HFA obsolete. In a climate defined by mistrust and elevated military risk, its foundational logic of managing danger through transparency, predictability, and respect for agreed norms remains indispensable. These principles continue to provide a "common vocabulary" of restraint and behavioural reference points that can moderate escalation even in the absence of full cooperation.

While treaty-based regimes have stalled, the OSCE's "soft" assets, including its institutional memory, agreed commitments, field missions, and convening power retain strategic relevance. For this purpose, the OSCE should prepare the ground for a future reset. The OSCE should safeguard lessons from Minsk and the SMM, maintain ceasefire-monitoring standards, and retain rapid deployment capacity. This would provide a minimal yet essential foundation for any future political opening, whether for a ceasefire in Ukraine or renewed risk-reduction dialogue. The current phase should therefore be seen as one of strategic preservation, not paralysis.

At the same time, the OSCE must widen its lens to address emerging technological threats such as AI, drones, cyber operations, information warfare, and data weaponisation that were accelerated by the war in Ukraine. UAV proliferation heightens the risk of hybrid warfare and civilian harm. Existing mechanisms of the 1st dimension offer a starting point: the FSC and the Global Exchange of Military Information (GEMI) could facilitate voluntary listing and engage in principled use of UAVs, clarifying normative conditions, strengthening transparency and reducing miscalculation.

Preserving the OSCE acquis while preparing for future challenges is now the essential task. Until political conditions permit renewed cooperation, the HFA should serve not as a relic of a bygone era, but as a stabilising framework for navigating confrontation and as the foundation upon which any eventual restoration of trust will depend.

New Opportunities for the Neglected Basket?

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Note: Any views or opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical marginalization and evolving significance of the OSCE's economic and environmental dimension—the so-called “second basket”—within the broader context of the Organization's three-dimensional approach to security. It traces the skepticism and underdevelopment that characterized this dimension during the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, contrasting it with the more institutionally and politically robust first (politico-military) and third (human rights) dimensions. The analysis highlights how shifts in global security threats—particularly the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation, alongside Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine—have created new opportunities for the second dimension to assert relevance. The paper details the OSCE's recent environmental initiatives, including climate-security programming and post-war recovery support in Ukraine, emphasizing the Organization's potential as a flexible and effective multilateral actor. It concludes by reflecting on the urgency of integrating environmental challenges into comprehensive security strategies and argues that the second dimension, once neglected, is now pivotal to the OSCE's future role in promoting stability, trust, and resilience across its participating States.

The neglected basket

For a long time, it seemed as if the OSCE's economic and environmental dimension – often referred to as “second basket” or “second dimension” – was treated as the Organization's stepchild. In particular during the Cold War period of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), and once again with the deterioration of relations in the OSCE at the beginning of the new millennium, the second dimension suffered from a reputation as a Trojan horse. This perception was especially prevalent among many Western participating States: they feared that economic co-operation would not only provide benefits to Eastern economies but also serve to legitimate and strengthen the political regimes in power. Additionally, Western diplomats and politicians feared that fostering economic ties could distract from, and even undermine, the crucial focus on the human dimension, the so-called “third basket” or “third dimension”. It was in this area that the central ideological struggle took place, and where significant political effort and attention were seen as most urgently needed.¹

On the other side, and despite some reservations against the usefulness of closer economic engagement, Eastern European negotiators within the CSCE hoped to gain impulses for technical innovation and expansion of sales markets for their production from economic exchange with the West. Moreover, influential circles in the West anticipated gaining leverage over the Eastern European political system through economic engagement.² Hence, in the Final Act, the Organization's fundamental document, participating States expressed their conviction “that their efforts to develop co-operation in the fields of trade, industry, science and technology, the environment and other areas of economic activity contribute to the reinforcement of peace and security in Europe and in the world as a whole.”

1 See M.C. Morgan, *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018, chapter 6.

2 Regarding Eastern and Western positions, their internal discrepancies and the negotiation process of the second basket see M.C. Morgan, chapter 5.

Additionally, the concept of “Wandel durch Handel”, namely “change through trade”,³ gained traction in the West as a strategy aimed at achieving political changes in the coercive regimes of Eastern Europe through sustained and constructive economic engagement. This policy strategy retained its attractiveness even after the fall of the Iron Curtain, shaping interactions between the West and Russia. However, the concept also had been harshly criticised since its inception, and in the eyes of many it was ultimately discredited following Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the beginning of the war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022.

From an internal OSCE perspective, the second dimension developed unevenly in comparison to its two sister dimensions. This imbalance can be traced back to the outcomes of the CSCE’s preparatory negotiations: while Soviet leaders “wanted to cooperate with the capitalists, but feared the consequences of doing so”, Western negotiators approached the talks from a more confident position, because “they also understood, that the solution to their economic woes lay primarily in the capitalist world”. Consequently, the “conference exposed the difficulties of reconciling the globalizing market place with the precepts of central planning” and the “shortcomings of Basket II made clear that Eastern and Western economic concepts remained worlds apart.”⁴

The politico-military, or “first” dimension represented the core of Europe’s new security order as introduced by the Final Act. It gained additional significance by the establishment of the Forum for Security Co-operation (FSC) in the early nineties, as the FSC functions as one of the OSCE’s key decision-making bodies, alongside the Permanent Council (PC).⁵ Furthermore, the period of détente during the first decade following the opening of Eastern Europe saw intensive activities in the field of arms control, amongst others through the creation of a wide range of confidence and security building measures, commonly referred to as “CSBMs”.

The human dimension flourished especially in the aftermath of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe: It was in the nineties that the dimension’s fundamental commitments were agreed and institutions were established, namely the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR),⁶ the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM)⁷ and the Representative on the Freedom of the Media (RFOM).⁸ Equally important, critical monitoring tools like the Vienna and Moscow Mechanisms came into existence.⁹ These commitments, institutions and mechanisms have retained their vital role as human rights watchdogs and as reform pillars for democracy and rule of law to this day.

Comparably meagre was the development of the second dimension. Although economic, scientific and environmental co-operation were included in the Final Act,¹⁰ this dimension lagged both thematically and

3 The notion reverts to a speech of E. Bahr, long-standing associate of German Federal Chancellor W. Brandt, in 1963. E. Bahr promotes a strategic shift through rapprochement with Eastern Europe, initiating the so-called German “Ostpolitik”, or policy of détente. See E. Bahr, *Wandel durch Handel (Tutzinger Rede)*, 15.07.1963. ([Egon Bahr, Wandel durch Annäherung \(Tutzinger Rede\) – 1000 Schlüsseldokumente](#)).

M.C. Morgan refers to the fact that also Soviet dissidents, e.g. A. Sakharov, favoured economic and scientific co-operation as means for mutual understanding and the reduction of the risk of war. See M.C. Morgan, p. 159.

4 M.C. Morgan, pp. 145, 166, 168.

5 Established by the Helsinki Summit Meeting in 1992.

6 Created by the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe as the “Office for Free Elections”.

7 Established by the Helsinki Summit Meeting in 1992.

8 Established in 1997 by Decision No. 193 of the Permanent Council.

9 Adopted at the 1989 Vienna Follow-up Meeting and the 1991 Conference on the Human Dimension.

10 See Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, *Final Act*, Helsinki 1975, p. 13 ff. [39501_1.pdf](#).

institutionally behind – even during the Organization’s so-called “golden years” in the nineties. Additionally, effective tools or mechanisms are lacking. The main thematic forum of the second dimension is the annual Economic and Environmental Forum (EEF) early September in Prague, meanwhile downsized to one and a half days. In contrast, in the first dimension the FSC is meeting on a weekly basis and the Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC) lasts two days. The main event of the third dimension, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), is organised every year for ten days.¹¹

It was primarily participating States from Central Asia, as well as Eastern and South Eastern Europe, that placed particular emphasis on the second dimension. For these countries, economic co-operation, in particular the topic of connectivity, was always of outmost importance. In contrast, many Western European and Transatlantic States seemed to fear that placing too much emphasis on economic issues might compete with, or even undermine efforts in the areas of human rights, rule of law and democracy. The view of these States obviously prevailed throughout the nineties and into the early two-thousands, contributing to an overall imbalance regarding the development of the Organization’s three thematic dimensions.

The position of the Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities was only established in 1997, followed by the adoption of the Strategy Document for the economic and environmental dimension in 2003.¹² The Co-ordinator, together with a regular staff of 25 forms the Office of the Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), being one of several entities within the OSCE Secretariat under the supervision of the Secretary General. According to the latest agreed Unified Budget (UB) decision in 2021, the OCEEA manages a budget of € 3.7 mio. By comparison, the Secretariat’s units being in charge for first dimension issues, i.e. the Trans National Threats Department (TNTD) as well as the FSC Support (FSCS) and the Communications and Technology Unit (CTU) dispose over a staff of altogether 43 people and a budget of € 6.0 mio. The three autonomous institutions of the third dimension collectively employ 191.5 regular staff and manage a budget of € 26.5 mio.¹³ Even acknowledging that some of the OCEEA’s administrative tasks are handled by other Secretariat units, the discrepancy in institutional and financial support remains striking.

New opportunities?

As a result, the Organization has historically focused far more on issues of hard security and human rights than on economic or environmental aspects of security, particularly in political terms. However, the unfolding triple planetary crisis, i.e. environmental pollution, climate change and loss of biodiversity, as well as Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine have the potential to reverse this trend, allowing the OSCE’s second dimension to gain more attention and relevance and demonstrate the Organization’s long-standing expertise, competence

11 EEF, ASRC and HDIM are obligatory events and need consensus on an annual basis. As agreement was increasingly difficult to reach, they have been renamed and organised as substitute events by several Chairpersonships. There was no consensus on EEF 2023, 2025, on ASRC 2023, and on HDIM 2021-2025.

12 See *Decision No. 194 Mandate for a Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities*, PC.DEC/194, 05.11.1997. [PCED194.PDF](#); *OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental dimension*, MC(11).JOUR/2, 02.12.2003, Annex 1. [MC.GAL/3/03/Rev.1](#).

13 OCEEA: staff 25, budget € 2.2 mio; TNTD: staff 31; budget € 2.8 mio; FSCS/CTU: staff 12, budget € 1.3 mio; ODIHR: staff 142, budget € 16.2 mio; HCNM: staff 32.5, budget € 3.5 mio; RFOM: staff 17, budget € 1.6 mio. See *Decision No. 1413 Approval of the 2021 Unified Budget*, PC.DEC/1413, 18.08.2021. [497680.pdf](#).

Extra-budgetary funds in 2021: OCEEA: € 1.4 mio; TNTD: € 1.9 mio; ODIHR: € 4.3 mio; HCNM: € 0.5 mio; RFOM: € 0.4 mio. See OSCE, *Annual Report 2021*, Vienna 2022, pp. 68, 72, 74, 83, 86. [520912.pdf](#).

Figures regarding staff and UB partially differ between the two above mentioned sources. Furthermore, this compilation does not include Field Operations’ share in OSCE’s programmatic work.

and capability in this field.¹⁴

Rising concerns of participating States about the impact of the triple planetary crisis have already led to an increased attention for the second dimension, in particular its environmental component. For example, the only substantive decision adopted at the 2021 Ministerial Council in Stockholm addressed the “challenges caused by climate change”.¹⁵ On the one hand, the fact that participating States could reach consensus only on a single substantial issue illustrated how deeply geopolitical divisions had already taken hold. On the other hand, the decision itself underlined the trend of growing recognition among States of the nexus between climate and security.¹⁶ Even on the eve of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at a time when consensus in nearly all areas of the Organization had become elusive, participating States were still able to unite around an issue viewed as a shared and serious threat to common security.

The Stockholm Decision provided the OSCE with a strong mandate to engage actively in the field of climate and environment related security. In response, the OCEEA and the Organization’s Field Operations implement a wide range of programmes and projects addressing climate change and its direct and indirect security implications. By tackling these global security threats, the OSCE is able to unfold its strength and comparative advantage as a multilateral and flexible platform and instrument: It operates across borders and regions, supports public institutions and state administrations, and particularly, co-ordinates and integrates these efforts with the expertise and engagement of civil society. The programmatic work illustrates the operational adaptability of the Organization. Despite the current political stalemate due to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the OSCE is able to deliver tangible results on the ground. Several flagship projects exemplify this practical approach: The Dniester River Basin Management Project, for example, promotes cross-border co-operation of Moldova and Ukraine, with a focus on institutional co-operation and transboundary water governance.¹⁷ Also, the OSCE-wide project on mapping climate change and security hotspots addresses challenges at an interregional level by promoting awareness-raising, capacity-building and knowledge exchange among a diverse array of governmental and non-governmental actors.¹⁸ Another notable initiative, the project on climate change impacts on critical energy infrastructure brings together 50 institutions across 14 participating States. It supports them in risk mitigation, preparedness and planning for a resilient and sustainable energy transition, thus reinforcing the OSCE’s role in helping States navigate the evolving

14 The Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) is such an example. The OSCE launched this initiative already in 2003, comprising a vast variety of environmental topics, beneficiaries and implementing partners. See [Environment and Security Initiative | OSCE](#).

15 *Decision No. 3/21 Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges caused by Climate Change*, MC.DEC/3/21, 03.12.2021. [MC.DEC/3/21](#).

16 A. Vogler points at the fact that “(a)pproximately 70 percent of national security strategy documents published between 2007 and 2020 referenced climate change”. See A. Vogler: Addressing the Climate-Security Nexus at the OSCE; in: C. Friesendorf, A. Kartsonaki, (eds.), *OSCE Insights*, Nomos, Baden-Baden 2025, p.1. [9783748945857-04.pdf](#).

17 See D.M. Bogdan, Transboundary Water Management, Biodiversity and Climate Change and their Impacts on Local, National and Regional Security: Examples from the Dniester River Basin Shared between the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine, in: H. Lampalzer, G. Hainzl (eds.), *Climate.Changes.Security. – Navigating Climate Change and Security Challenges in the OSCE Region*, Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie No. 04/2024, Wien 2024, p. 137-155. ([Bundesheer - Wissenschaftliche Publikationen - Climate.Changes.Security. - 2nd updated Edition](#)).

18 [Strengthening Responses to Security Risks from Climate Change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia](#); ([Strengthening Responses to Security Risks from Climate Change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia | OSCE](#)); and [Strengthening responses to security risks from climate change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia](#) [Strengthening responses to security risks from climate change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia | adelphi](#)

landscape of climate-related security risks.¹⁹

Additionally, the Organization managed to cope with the phenomenon of climate change on a purely political level. Based on the Stockholm Decision, and initiated by the Secretary General in 2023, the respective Chair-in-Office has organised since a climate and security conference every year.²⁰ Furthermore, the impacts of climate change and security related environmental issues have become regular agenda items in second dimension conferences and events.

An area still ripe for development is the correlation between climate change and conflict. Neither the OSCE's 2011 decision on the conflict cycle²¹ nor the 2021 decision on climate change explicitly recognise climate change as an accelerator or cause of conflict despite a growing body of research which concedes that “both the consequences of biodiversity loss and climate change, as well as conflict and insecurity, are far-reaching and touch all aspects of human society” and that “nature and conflict are increasingly interacting”.²² In this respect, OSCE's participating States appear to be lagging behind. The conflict cycle's component of early warning could be extended to better encompass environmental factors, including human-made environmental disasters and the impact of climate change on tangible security challenges.

The prevention and management of environment-related security challenges bears also the significant potential for reinvigorating trust and confidence-building among participating States. The long-term threats emanating from environmental pollution and climate change necessitate cross-border, regional and multi-institutional co-operation. If participating States are serious about mitigating grave future security risks and preventing irreversible damages to ecosystems and human livelihoods, they are effectively compelled to co-operate. The OSCE provides a unique opportunity in this regard, offering both the political platform as well as the practical action. However, the opportunity must be actively seized.

19 'Mitigating Climate Change Threats to Critical Energy Infrastructure', Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities, 10 April 2025. Accessed via <https://oceeaa.osce.org/oceeaa/588993>.

20 OSCE High-Level Conference on Climate Change, Vienna 07.07.2023; Chairpersonship's High-Level Conference on Climate Change, Malta, 21.06.2024; Chairpersonship Conference on Climate and Security, Espoo, 11.06.2025

21 "Taking into account that impediments to economic welfare and social development as well as threats to environmental security, including environmental degradation, natural and man-made disasters and their possible impact on migratory pressures, could be potential contributors to conflict"; in: *Decision No. 3/11 On Elements of the Conflict Cycle, related to enhancing the OSCE's Capabilities in Early Warning, Early Action, Dialogue Facilitation and Mediation Support, and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation*, MC.DEC/3/11, 07.12.2011 ([MC.DEC/3/11](#)).

22 L. Rüttinger, et al., *The nature of conflict and peace: The links between environment, security and peace and their importance for the United Nations*, WWF/Adelphi, Gland/Berlin April 2022, p.11. [The nature of conflict and peace: The links between environment, security and peace and their importance for the United Nations | Climate-Diplomacy](#).

See also T.H.-Dixon, A reflection on 30 years of climate and conflict, in: T. Clack, et al., *Climate Change, Conflict, and (In)Security. Hot War*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York, 2024, chapter 16.

G. Mastrojenni, A. Pasini, *Effetto serra, effetto guerra*, Chiarelettere, Milano 2017, pp. 18, 37, 44-45, 53.

G. Mastrojenni and A. Pasini develop a circular model of climate change and conflict, p. 54.

A. Detges, *Climate and Conflict: Reviewing the Statistical Evidence. A summary for policy-makers*, Climate Diplomacy, Adelphi/Federal Foreign Office, Berlin March 2017. [Climate and conflict: reviewing the statistical evidence](#).

However, some researchers are still more hesitant, negating the “linear causation” as an “illusion” (T. Deligiannis, *Decentering climate security: The research and policy implications of sudden-onset and slow-onset climate change*, in T. Clack, et al., *Climate Change, Conflict, and (In)Security. Hot War*, Routledge, Abingdon/New York 2024, p. 127), or point to some remaining “knowledge gaps” (B. Mosello, et al., *The Climate change-conflict connection - The current state of knowledge of knowledge*, *Climate-Fragility Discussion Paper*, adelphi research, Berlin November 12, 2019, p.8. [Climate-fragility Discussion Paper: \(climate-diplomacy.org\)](#)).

Moreover, efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change present an additional tool of fostering inclusivity and cohesion across the OSCE region. To name just a few: Melting glaciers, water scarcity and drought in Central Asia and in Alpine regions of Central Europe, devastating wild-fires in the Mediterranean and throughout Northern Europe and North America, thawing permafrost in Siberia and all-over the OSCE's mountain areas, invasive species threatening the biodiversity of all OSCE regions and many other "centenary events" become alarmingly frequent and pose a growing threat to human security. Lastly, the melting of Arctic ice endangers coastal communities not only in the OSCE region, but across the globe, demanding urgent and co-ordinated international action.

The catastrophic impact of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine on both the economy and the environment as well as the noxious emissions caused by this war, have also brought second dimension topics to the forefront of political and programmatic attention. Politically, all second dimension fora and events have since the onset of the war focused on examining its consequences.²³ On the operational level, significant programmes and projects, albeit financed by so-called extra-budgetary (or voluntary) contributions, have been launched to address the severe economic, environmental and climate related harm caused by the war. By documenting the devastating impacts, registering the widespread damage and mapping the broadly polluted areas, the various projects implemented by the OCEEA and OSCE's Support Programme for Ukraine do not only illustrate the disastrous dimension of the war, but also play a vital role in gathering evidence and data for future accountability mechanisms and reconstruction efforts.

The OSCE's role in rebuilding Ukraine is still to be defined. While its financial contribution will likely be limited, the Organization can nevertheless assume meaningful responsibility by concentrating on its above-mentioned strengths and comparative advantages. In doing so, the OSCE can provide effective support to a broad range of fundamental state functions and reform efforts. The second dimension is expected to play a significant role in the OSCE's assistance programme for Ukraine. Essential areas like energy security, food security, water management and reconstruction of war-damaged environment are fields of action, where the OSCE can offer targeted support, drawing on its valuable experiences and profound expertise.

Conclusion

The implications of climate change and environmental pollution constitute a global threat, indeed a "planetary" crisis. Consequently, any effective response must be global, with action rooted in multilateral co-operation. Yet, the currently prevailing global political climate seems to be regressing from previously achieved levels of ambition and action. Environmental and climate-related threats are frequently entangled in ideological debates, still ignored, downplayed, or attributed to the future, drawing the immediate political attention towards more conventional short- and mid-term challenges. Limited resources, institutional challenges and time constraints further narrow the manoeuvring space of international actors. Moreover, adaptation measures seem to prevail over mitigation efforts, namely addressing more the symptoms than the

23 E.g. special meetings of the Economic and Environmental Committee (EEC) were held on 19.06.2023 on "Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine - Environmental, humanitarian and economic consequences of the destruction of the Kakhovka HPP dam for the OSCE region", on 31.05.2024 on "Addressing the economic and environmental impacts of Russia's war against Ukraine, including the destruction of critical infrastructure and the consequent effects on security in the OSCE region" and on 27.06.2025 on "Environmental integrity – addressing environmental and maritime security, including supply chain resilience", focussing *inter alia* on Russia's shadow fleet.

Furthermore, a special PC meeting was organised on 06.06.2023 on the destruction of the Kakhovka dam and a special PC-FSC-EEC side event was held on 12.07.2023 on the same issue.

root causes of the triple planetary crisis. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, environment and climate related topics have considerably gained weight in the OSCE throughout the last years.

It remains to be seen whether in the long run environmental issues and climate challenges will be able to play the bridging role once envisaged for economic co-operation in the early days of the CSCE. The key difference between then and now lies in the urgency and imperative to act collectively: because failure to co-operate meaningfully on environmental threats nowadays will have irreversible damaging consequences in the mid- and long-term perspective. In addition, effective responses to these threats have become a key factor in any comprehensive approach to security, as it constitutes the organisation's professed security concept. Whereas for much of the OSCE's history the economic and environmental dimension of its work has been marginal, the issue now goes to the heart of security for many participating States. Therefore, they have a self-interest to co-operate, including by working through the OSCE.



The Mediterranean Chapter at Fifty: The OSCE's Southern Engagement

Elizabeth Abela Hampel

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Note: Any views or opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author.

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Abstract

Marking fifty years since the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, this article examines the evolution and contemporary relevance of the OSCE's Mediterranean Chapter. It highlights Malta's decisive role in embedding the Mediterranean dimension into the Final Act, traces how the OSCE's comprehensive security approach inspired later regional initiatives, and reviews the development of the Mediterranean Partnership as a platform for dialogue, confidence-building, and practical cooperation.

Introduction

Fifty years since the signing of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, this moment offers an opportunity to review recent developments in the OSCE's Mediterranean dialogue. This article will shed light on how the Chapter on the Mediterranean influenced the setup of other regional frameworks in the area as well as how its relevance might evolve amid a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Malta was instrumental in embedding the Mediterranean Chapter into the Helsinki Final Act, ensuring that European security extended beyond continental borders to include its southern neighbours¹. By advocating for the inclusion of Mediterranean dimension, Malta helped broaden the scope of East-West dialogue to reflect the geopolitical realities of the region.

The OSCE was one of the first institutions to establish links with countries on the Southern Mediterranean littoral and the Middle East. Today, the OSCE Mediterranean Partners include all North African countries, Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia (except Libya, which has, however, shown interest in the dialogue) as well as Israel and Jordan. As discussed in a paper by Monika Wohlfeld: "No country has been added to this group of six states since 1998, although the Palestinian National Authority (in 2004 and 2008) and Libya (in 2013) have formulated requests for admission as Partner States²".

The partnership is based on interaction between the OSCE and the Mediterranean Partners that enjoy relations similar to observer status with the Organization. The crisis in the Middle East resulting from the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks on Israel had profound influence on the Mediterranean dialogue. Consequently, the resulting political tensions have had wider implications on the structured cooperation which has reached an all time low. Although the idea of "shared security" is more urgent than ever amid growing geopolitical fragmentation, the Organization is grappling with complex challenges. Consensus is increasingly elusive, foundational divides are widening, and multilateral engagement is under strain. Yet, as the security situation in Europe and beyond continues to deteriorate and other transnational challenges emerge on the horizon, the situation beckons for future enhanced co-operation between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean.

1 See Testimony of the late Ambassador Evarist Saliba of Malta, in CSCE Testimonies Causes and Consequences of the Helsinki Final Act 1972–1989; Published by the Prague Office of the OSCE Secretariat náměstí Pod Kaštany 2 160 00 Prague, Czech Republic Compiled by Alice Němcová © OSCE 2013, page 167, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/6/c/459244.pdf>

2 Monika Wohlfeld, OSCE's Mediterranean Engagement on the Eve of the 40th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, page 44, published in Towards "Helsinki +40": The OSCE, the Global Mediterranean, and the Future of Cooperative Security, New Med research network <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/c/126351.pdf>

Distinct yet integral – The Mediterranean Chapter

The Mediterranean Chapter was formally introduced into the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 as a distinct yet integral component of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)³. The chapter was distinct because it addressed external actors and regional dynamics beyond the immediate East-West divide. At a time when Europe was split by ideological iron curtains and guarded borders, the Mediterranean Chapter cast its attention southward, acknowledging that the region's dynamics could not be disconnected from the broader fabric of European security. Simultaneously, it was integral to the Final Act's architecture because it embodied the CSCE's holistic vision of peace and security. It is thanks to the foresight of Maltese Statesmen and diplomats that the Helsinki Final Act recognized that "security in Europe is to be considered in the broader context of world security" and that developments in the Mediterranean directly affected stability across the continent. This acknowledgment is linked to the OSCE's comprehensive security concept, which encompasses political-military, economic, environmental, and human dimensions, by extending security considerations beyond internal European affairs to also include external partnerships, notably with Mediterranean countries.

Over the decades, the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership has facilitated numerous collaborative efforts. Regular interaction through structured cooperation, including Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation Group meetings and the annual OSCE Mediterranean Conferences have provided platforms for dialogue on shared challenges, including migration, climate change, counter-terrorism, and economic cooperation. High-level OSCE Troika meetings are held in the margins of the annual Ministerial Council.

This cooperative approach based on the interlinkage of security enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act has influenced the development of relations that resonates beyond the OSCE area. The development of relations from the early nineties with the Asian Partners for Cooperation is testament to that. The Asian Partners include Afghanistan, Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Thailand.

These relations with the Mediterranean and Asian Partners for Co-operation bring added value to the OSCE in the context of the interconnection of global challenges, and the need to enhance mutual trust and stability for the OSCE and neighbouring regions. The structured cooperation supports efforts to incorporate their perspectives and expertise in OSCE work and to increase the visibility of the results of these activities. Partners for Cooperation, while not signing up to the OSCE's body of commitments and decisions, are encouraged to consider their voluntary implementation⁴.

How the Mediterranean Chapter in the Helsinki Final Act inspired other regional initiatives

The inclusion of the Mediterranean Chapter in the Helsinki Final Act was not only significant for broadening the scope of European security-thinking, but also because it laid the groundwork for further Euro-Med engagement. The OSCE's Mediterranean partnership inspired regional initiatives such as the Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) in 1995, and later the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) in 2008.

While the Barcelona Process and the Union for the Mediterranean have diverged from an institutional perspective, they retain the OSCE's multi-dimensional approach to security. The Barcelona Process, established in

3 See 'Questions relating to Security and Co-operation in the Mediterranean, in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, pages 34-35, https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/c/39501_1.pdf

4 "We will encourage them to voluntarily implement the principles and commitments of the OSCE and will co-operate with them in this as appropriate." See OSCE Strategy to Address Threats to Security and Stability in the Twenty-First Century, para 23, in Eleventh Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council, Maastricht, 1-2 December 2003 (MC.DOC/1/03), p. 1-10, <http://www.osce.org/mc/40533>

1995, structured its framework based on the OSCE's three-basket approach, focusing on political and security cooperation, economic and financial partnership, and social, cultural, and human partnership. This framework aimed to foster a Euro-Mediterranean partnership with shared peace, stability, and socio-economic progress.

The UfM, which transpired from the Barcelona Process, focuses more on specific projects and initiatives that address inclusive and sustainable development, stability and integration in the Euro-Mediterranean area. In 2018, the OSCE and UfM signed a Memorandum of Understanding to deepen cooperation between the two institutions to address climate-related security challenges that impact regional stability, and have held some joint initiatives.

The idea of a parliamentary council - similarly a Maltese initiative- was born of a proposal on a Conference on Security and Cooperation in the Mediterranean. Under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean (PAM) that brings together all littoral states of the Mediterranean was inaugurated in Amman, Jordan in 2006 after negotiations that had started in 1992. The three PAM standing committees are also reflective of the Helsinki Final Act's three baskets; with First Standing Committee on Political and Security-Related Cooperation, Second Standing Committee on Economic, Social and Environmental Cooperation, and Third Standing Committee on Dialogue among Civilisations and Human Rights.

A platform for dialogue

Since its inception, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has provided an essential venue for dialogue on common priorities and shared concerns that take inspiration from the OSCE experience in the comprehensive approach to security⁵.

In addition to facilitating bilateral relations between each of the Mediterranean Partners and the OSCE, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership also offers a platform for dialogue among the partners themselves.

Each OSCE Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation has their own specific interests, and bilateral areas of cooperation with OSCE. While all Partners share interest on common themes, they can also exchange experiences according to their own priorities; since cooperation varies based on their geopolitical context, national interests, and regional challenges.

A series of OSCE Chairpersonships have sought to build collaborative agendas, bringing together northern and southern stakeholders to address a shared set of challenges, such as transnational organized crime, migration, climate risks, and regional fragility.

The 2018 OSCE Milan Ministerial Declaration⁶ is the most recent consensus-based document on the Mediterranean. It recognized Mediterranean Partners as collaborators in addressing shared security challenges, acknowledging their active role in fostering regional stability and promoting cooperative solutions to issues like terrorism, migration, and organized crime. The Declaration also highlighted the importance of inclusive dialogue, youth empowerment, human rights, and economic development in promoting regional stability.

In the last two years, the structured cooperation with the OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation Group has stalled due to the severe deterioration in Middle East tensions, particularly following the terrorist attacks on Israel since 7 October 2023 and rising regional polarization. This has placed significant strain on a format

5 For an overview of the cooperation framework with the Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation, see <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/mediterranean>

6 <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/406532F>

designed around inclusive dialogue based on confidence-building. As a result, the meetings of the Mediterranean Partner for Cooperation Group⁷ have dwindled to a halt, with no annual Mediterranean Conference⁸ nor the high-level OSCE Troika meeting.

Despite efforts, the Mediterranean Partnership continues to face significant challenges. Perceived irrelevance is chief among these. Part of this perception may stem from a deeper structural challenge: many of the region's most persistent conflicts are not merely disputes over policy or territory, but are also rooted in identity, memory, and mutually exclusive worldviews. In such cases, efforts to gather around the table may meet resistance, not only due to a lack of goodwill, but because of fundamentally divergent narratives.

Some critics argue that the partnership lacks strategic impact, with limited tangible outcomes in addressing pressing regional issues. Evolving geopolitics also add to the challenging context. Shifts in global power dynamics and internal conflicts within the Mediterranean, most notably the ongoing conflict in Gaza, have made cooperative efforts difficult.

Indeed, as conflict continues to disrupt cooperation, the OSCE's quiet persistence in maintaining channels of dialogue becomes its greatest asset. In moments of high fragmentation, presence and continuity, not necessarily agreement, are themselves strategic achievements.

Even in this period of high tension, there is space to promote practical cooperation and participation of the Mediterranean Partners in capacity building. The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership offers mutual advantages including opportunities to share experiences and expertise.⁹ By way of example, participants from Mediterranean Partners regularly take part in the annual Study-Visit Programme for the Partners for Co-operation¹⁰. In the course of 2024, Mediterranean Partners have also participated in simulation exercises on combating trafficking in human beings, as well as a regional scenario-based workshop on the illicit trafficking in cultural property held in Malta. Law enforcement experts from Mediterranean Partners also participated in a Mediterranean Regional Simulation-based Training Exercise on Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, held in Vicenza, Italy¹¹. Such activities provide continuity and keep engagement alive, even when the political environment narrows the space for formal diplomacy.

Mindful of the above, the current stagnation of the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership must not be accepted as an inevitable outcome of conflict or incommensurability. On the contrary, this moment calls for a reframing of what dialogue is and what it can achieve.

Reframing dialogue in times of fragmentation

For the OSCE's Mediterranean engagement to retain strategic relevance, it may be useful to reconceive its dialogue platforms not solely as precursors to consensus, but as sites of discursive endurance, where competing

7 The most recent meeting of the Mediterranean Partners for Cooperation Group meeting was held on 11 March 2024 on Identifying Opportunities for Women's Economic Empowerment in the New World of Work in the OSCE and the Mediterranean Region.

8 The most recent OSCE Mediterranean Conference was held on 25 October 2022 in Jordan. See OSCE press release, 'Strengthening co-operation to overcome common challenges focus of OSCE Mediterranean Conference in Jordan', 25 Oct 2022, <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/mediterranean/529611>

9 See Elizabeth Abela Hampel, *The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership – a determined and durable dialogue?* (2012) <https://www.shrmonitor.org/assets/uploads/2023/02/The-OSCE-Mediterranean-Partnership-A-durable-and-determined-dialogue.pdf>

10 See OSCE website on 2024 and 2025 Study Visit Programme for OSCE Asian and Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation, <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/593609>; <https://www.osce.org/partners-for-cooperation/570909>

11 See OSCE press release, 'Anti-trafficking practitioners meet in Italy for first Mediterranean regional simulation-based training exercise', 11 Oct 2024, <https://www.osce.org/cthb/578104>

perspectives can be expressed and heard without requiring agreement.

This model of engagement places emphasis on narrative exchange, even amid foundational disagreement. Such a posture is not unfamiliar to the OSCE: its long-standing commitment to confidence-building, preventive diplomacy, and multidimensional security already recognises that peace is as much about sustaining dialogue as it is about resolving disputes.

In a region marked by entrenched divisions, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership may not serve as a venue for resolving deep political disputes. Its relevance could lie elsewhere: in sustaining engagement where silence would be costlier, and in advancing cooperation where interests overlap. Even in an era of heightened antagonism, selective, pragmatic dialogue remains possible, and necessary, on transboundary issues that no state can address alone.

Among these:

- Climate and environmental resilience, promoting a blue economy: Rising temperatures, water scarcity, desertification, and environmental degradation are not just ecological concerns, they are direct stressors on security, livelihoods, and regional stability.
- Migration governance: Migration remains a shared and inescapable reality in the Mediterranean. The Partnership can support structured exchanges on practical tools, early warning systems, legal pathways, return and reintegration mechanisms.
- Maritime security and domain awareness: The Mediterranean demands cooperative risk reduction to help prevent accidents, conflict escalation, and criminal exploitation of shared waters.
- Protection of cultural heritage: cultural heritage management can contribute to sustainable development.
- Youth and skills mobility: Long-term regional stability is inseparable from opportunity to future generations. Investing in youth engagement can reduce alienation, strengthen mutual understanding, and contribute to regional development.
- Digital cooperation and bridging the digital divide: Enhancing cybersecurity and leveraging digital technologies to promote economic development, connectivity and social inclusion.

Way forward

Building on this reframed understanding of dialogue, with growing instability in the Euro-Mediterranean area and intensifying tensions across the Middle East, a central question arises: what mechanisms can support a renewed Mediterranean dialogue, one that aligns with present-day geopolitical shifts and addresses emerging regional needs?

A similar question was raised by Emiliano Alessandri (2014)¹² when debating possible options in the region. He then argues that in a context where constructive dialogue is increasingly scarce, every viable forum should be considered. Longstanding structures such as the Barcelona Process/Union for the Mediterranean and other initiatives under the EU and NATO continue to serve specific functions with their distinct expertise. Alessandri also points out that the OSCE's platform for dialogue brings with it an inclusive and diverse membership,

12 See Emiliano Alessandri, The Global Mediterranean and the OSCE Platform for Dialogue, International Affairs Forum (IAF), 4 Mar 2021, https://www.ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternal_Document.cfm?contenttype_id=5&ContentID=9138

which gathers together key external powers involved in the MENA region, including US, Russia and Turkey. It provides a rare multilateral setting where NATO, the EU, and other participating States can engage in dialogue on issues central to today's Mediterranean security landscape, particularly the link between geopolitical multipolarity and regional stability. Drawing on decades of OSCE experience in easing inter-state tensions and guiding post-conflict transitions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, this framework has a valuable toolkit to offer Mediterranean Partnership¹³.

Two elements are underscored further by Alessandri, that make the OSCE's Mediterranean dialogue especially pertinent for today's context. First, the OSCE's core mandate includes both inter-state conflict management and responses to transnational threats, enabling it to serve as a convener even when political consensus is limited. Second, the organization has long embraced a comprehensive understanding of security, one that spans military, economic-environmental, and human rights dimensions¹⁴.

Moreover, Alessandri argues the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which laid the foundation for the OSCE, was groundbreaking in its elevation of human rights and individual freedoms to the level of international commitments. Through its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the OSCE has built significant expertise in election monitoring, democratic governance, and the promotion of human rights. These experiences have been shared with Mediterranean Partners, particularly in the wake of transformative events such as the Arab Spring¹⁵. ODIHR's role extended to concrete cooperation projects, such as training of election observers and reviewing draft legislation. In addition, as raised in another article by Colin Scicluna (2012), the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) 'is also uniquely placed to offer a brand of expertise and guidance not easily found elsewhere'. For example, in 2022, the RFOM engaged with youth from the Mediterranean and Middle East during the international conference "Young People and Information: It's Complicated" organised by the Ministry for Foreign and European Affairs and Trade together with 3CL Foundation in Malta¹⁶. They discussed issues of technology and media freedom based on a human rights and a multi-sectoral approach with the active involvement of youth.

In the long run, the OSCE's engagement with Mediterranean Partners could be seen as a way to foster stability and dialogue, not by resolving all underlying tensions, but by maintaining open channels of communication that may later support peacebuilding when conditions allow.

Observers have noted that it is beyond the OSCE's mandate to address the Middle Eastern tensions, particularly when it could jeopardise the Mediterranean Partnership format whilst providing little added value. It is argued such matters should continue to be addressed in other relevant fora, including at the UN Security Council.

It is important that we preserve cooperation in the Mediterranean Partnership format, as it would continue to benefit partners, and common work across the three dimensions regardless of the broader political situation. By safeguarding a forum for inclusive, multidimensional engagement, the OSCE can contribute, quietly but meaningfully to long term regional resilience.

13 *ibid*

14 *ibid*

15 *ibid*

16 See Press Release, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media concludes visit to Malta, 14 November 2022, <https://rfom.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/531101#:~:text=VIENNA%2C%2014%20November%202022%20%2D%20OSCE.government%20authorities%20and%20civil%20society>.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean Chapter remains a distinct and integral component of the OSCE's comprehensive security framework. By acknowledging past achievements and addressing current challenges, the partnership can adapt to a changing geopolitical landscape and continue to promote stability and cooperation in the region.

building trust and cooperative security across the Euro-Mediterranean space, it faces multiple challenges in the current geopolitical environment. The shocks of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the deepening conflict in the Middle East, especially around the war in Gaza and surrounding Iranian-linked escalations, have exposed the structural and strategic limitations of this partnership.

In today's volatile regional climate, success should not be measured solely by breakthroughs or formal agreements, but also by the endurance of dialogue itself. The OSCE Mediterranean Partnership, even in moments of limited political traction, continues to provide a unique space for structured exchange. As peace in the Mediterranean becomes ever more contested, the value of a platform that enables engagement without preconditions cannot be understated.

In a time when many multilateral institutions are questioned or sidelined, the persistence of the OSCE's security approach, inclusive, adaptable, and dialogue-based, is a meaningful reminder of the long-term value of engagement.

Malta's role in the development of the Mediterranean Partnership pays tribute to the foresight of a small state recognizing complex regional dynamics. Malta continues to be a strong proponent of the partnership, considering its unique position as an EU member state and a neutral country to facilitate dialogue between both shores of the Mediterranean. Malta's continued engagement helps to foster cooperation on a range of issues impacting the region, such as youth participation, climate security, countering radicalization and conflict resolution.

In a region grappling with instability and fragmentation, the Helsinki vision and the OSCE Mediterranean dialogue remain a critical reference point for any viable future architecture of peace and cooperation. The OSCE's long-standing principles and adaptive mechanisms offer possible pathways to revive and re-energize Mediterranean dialogue in the future.

At the opening of the 31st annual gathering of OSCE Foreign Ministers - the Ministerial Council - Malta's 2024 Chair-in-Office, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism Ian Borg¹⁷, underscored a critical point: in times of war and overlapping crises, the OSCE is needed more than ever as one of the last remaining open channels of communication in Europe. The same urgency applies to the OSCE's Mediterranean Partnership.

Preserving and gradually revitalizing the Mediterranean dialogue may require not a radical overhaul, but a modest reorientation, one that accepts disagreement as a structural condition, yet insists on the dignity of discourse. The OSCE, with its experience in confidence-building, tolerance of complexity, and emphasis on comprehensive security, is well positioned to support such engagement. In doing so, it upholds a vision of peace that is not only rooted in sameness, but also in respectful coexistence across profound difference.

17 See OSCE press release, 'We must strengthen commitments and build a safer, more co-operative future, says OSCE Chair at opening of 31st Ministerial Council in Malta', 5 Dec 2024, <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/582208>



Section 4: Future Perspectives

Security and Human Rights Journal

Special Edition: The OSCE at 50

The OSCE at 50: Reviving the spirit of Helsinki

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Abstract

This article gives a personal view of the preparatory phase of the negotiations leading to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act on 1st August 1975, and the early stages of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), seen from the perspective of the nine member states of the European Community (EC) as it was then known. It underlines the impact of the CSCE (and subsequently the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) as a catalyst for change, and highlights examples of its confidence building role in conflict and post conflict situations, such as the Transdniestrian settlement process and the Western Balkans.¹

Introduction

In January 2025, Finland took over the rotating Chairpersonship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This is the second time Finland has assumed this role, having chosen the theme of ‘Resilience’ as its focus for this jubilee year. Throughout its fifty year history, the OSCE has weathered one crisis after another. Each time it emerged, battered but ready and better prepared to play a role in peace building.

It happened in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the setting up of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, just as the OSCE was preparing to mark the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act the following year. It is happening again today following the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Hopefully, sooner rather than later, the guns will be silenced and the OSCE will once again be called upon to play its role in early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, and post conflict rehabilitation.

Considering the historic transformations on the European continent since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975, what has been achieved by the OSCE since then, despite the frequent lack of political will on the part of the participating States, is truly remarkable. The development of its comprehensive approach to security, the establishment of its three autonomous institutions (the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights - ODIHR, the High Commissioner on National Minorities – HCNM, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media - RFOM), and the work over the years of its many diverse field operations, are reminders of the range and extent of these achievements.

Probably the most existential crisis in the Organization’s history is playing out today, with the ongoing war on the European continent perpetrated by one participating State (Russia) against another (Ukraine), with the former once again violating core principles of the Helsinki Final Act. Yet despite this latest crisis, these principles are more relevant than ever. They are a potent reminder of what can be achieved through cooperation, patient diplomacy and the building of trust. They are also a warning of the consequences if we fail to defend them.

The best way to honour the pioneering spirit which prevailed during the negotiations which led to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act and the road travelled since then, will be for the 57 participating States to demonstrate renewed political will in reaffirming the 10 Helsinki Principles as well as the commitments developed over the

1 On 1st August 1975, the heads of state or government of 35 nations, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, signed the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). By adopting 10 principles guiding relations among the participating States contained in the document, the 35 leaders launched the ‘Helsinki Process’ which became the main focus for political consultation and negotiation on a comprehensive set of issues, including human rights and fundamental freedoms. The CSCE became the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) from 1st January 1995 to reflect the institutional development from a process into a body with permanent structures and autonomous institutions.

years.

Preparatory phase and first years of the CSCE - some personal reflections.

It was as a junior member of the European Commission's team that I participated in the final stages of the negotiations leading to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, as well as in the first Review Meeting in Belgrade from November 1977 to March 1978. The first phase had taken place in Helsinki from November 1972 to July 1973 bringing together representatives from the 35 participating States. It had set out the three broad categories of issues to be tackled in the negotiations (the three 'Baskets', covering European security in Basket one, cooperation in economics, science and technology and the environment in Basket two, humanitarian and cultural cooperation in Basket three, plus a fourth category on follow up meetings). The second and final phase took place in Geneva from September 1973 to July 1975.

This was a challenging time for East-West relations. The Cold War, a period marked by mistrust and deep-rooted ideological conflict, cast a dark shadow over the entire European continent and beyond. The European Community (EC) as it was then known was still finding its feet on the international stage. The Soviet Union refused to recognise its existence and any discussions with the European Commission for example on economic matters had to take place on neutral ground. These usually took place within the UN Economic Commission for Europe, or at side meetings hosted by the neutral and non-aligned countries.

The EC, composed of nine member states at that time, played a critical role in the negotiations leading to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. This role was greatly facilitated by the informal intergovernmental mechanism established in 1970, following the so-called Davignon Report (named after the Belgian political director and future member of the European Commission, Etienne Davignon). Aimed at providing a framework for coordinating and harmonising the foreign policies of the nine outside the European Community structures, the European Political Cooperation (EPC) mechanism ensured that the EC group of nine had a voice on the international stage.

Using a 'chef de file' system in the negotiations, the EC was able to cover the countless side meetings and parallel negotiations under all three Baskets with individual member states taking the lead on specific issues.² The United States, under the Nixon Administration and its Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, were keen to emphasise during the negotiations on Basket one the military aspects of detente and preserving the centrality of NATO in the defence of Western Europe. They were supported by individual members of the European Community who were also members of NATO. However it is worth mentioning that NATO at that time also counted the then repressive regimes of Greece, Portugal and Turkey among its members.

The EC on the other hand, working as a cohesive group and as a non-military actor with no "hard power" baggage, was better placed to push on all the issues under the other Baskets, especially Basket three, where human rights, freedom of religion and movement, etc, were a key priority for the West. As such, the group was able to project in the negotiations the same values contained in the founding principles of the European integration project - the rule of law, representative democracy and social justice. That it was able to do so and at the same time obtain major concessions from Moscow greatly enhanced its standing as a key player in European detente in subsequent years.

² D.Mockli (2008), "The EC-Nine, the CSCE and the changing patterns of European Security", in A.Wenger, V.Mastny and C.Neunlist (eds.),Origins of the European Security System : The Helsinki Process Revisited 1965-1975, London, Routledge.

The EC was no less successful in Basket two issues, where the European Commission team, embedded within the delegation of the member state holding the six month rotating Presidency of the Council of the EC, provided significant input on issues relating to removing trade barriers, promoting business contacts and commercial exchanges, amongst others.

This official recognition of the role of the EC in the Helsinki process is also reflected in the signing of the Final Act itself, when Aldo Moro signed not only as Prime Minister of Italy but also “in his capacity as President in Office of the Council of the `European Communities”. This was a major success for its evolving foreign policy role on the world stage. To quote Daniel Mockli in the book “Origins of the European Security System”³: “Yet it is hard to exaggerate the significance of finally attaining this double signature, which reflected the Nine’s rise as an acknowledged actor in European security as much as their collective contribution to the CSCE”⁴.

A catalyst for change

Even if some would argue that the Helsinki Final Act represented acceptance of the dividing lines in Europe at the time and of Moscow’s control over the Warsaw Pact countries, nevertheless, as history unfolded, it became a catalyst for change in ways that Moscow would never have expected. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall, bringing a peaceful end to the division of Germany and a re-drawing of the map of Europe overnight represented dramatic geopolitical changes in Europe’s security architecture. That the CSCE and subsequently the OSCE was able to rise to the occasion at each turn of the page of Europe’s history is testimony to its enduring strength and the added value it has brought to the peaceful settlement of disputes and conflict management in Europe.

The biggest impact in my view was in the human dimension with the lifeline it provided to the dissident movements in eastern Europe which were faced with persecution during the dark years of the Cold War. For many, it was replacing despair with hope. It had a galvanising effect in expanding the notion of security to include fundamental freedoms. Helsinki monitoring groups were established in many countries which kept public attention focussed on those leaders who failed to respect the commitments, particularly in relation to human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Probably the most well known dissident at the time was Andrei Sakharov, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. That Moscow had signed up to those commitments in the Helsinki Final Act increased the pressure for Sakharov’s eventual release in 1986 from exile to Gorki (now known as Nizhny Novgorod) following the coming to power in early 1985 of a new leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, and in particular his summit meeting in Reykjavik in October 1986 with US President Reagan. The example of Sakharov and of many other courageous personalities such as Vaclav Havel in then Czechoslovakia, highlighted the critical anchor provided by the Final Act which they used to maximum advantage.

3 D.Mockli (2008), “The EC-Nine, the CSCE and the changing patterns of European Security”, in A.Wenger, V.Mastny and C.Neunlist (eds.), *Origins of the European Security System : The Helsinki Process Revisited 1965-1975*, London, Routledge.

4 Today, after acquiring formal status in 2006 under the OSCE Rules and Procedures, the EU has its own seat at the table next to the EU member state holding the six month rotating Presidency of the European Council.

Confidence building measures

One of the more successful areas of cooperation within the OSCE lies in early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, and peace building, which remain an integral part of the organisation's "raison d'être". Using the Conflict Prevention Centre established at the Paris Summit in 1990, the Platform for Cooperative Security adopted at the Istanbul Summit in 1999, as well as its Confidence and Security Building Measures (CSBMs) and its Field Operations, the OSCE has been able to play a major role in dealing with successive conflict and potential conflict situations in the OSCE region.

Transdniestrian settlement process

One such example is the Transdniestrian settlement process. A breakaway region of the Republic of Moldova, Transdnistria represents one of those conflicts that are referred to as "frozen", or "protracted conflicts" which emerged following the break-up of the Soviet Union. The outbreak of hostilities in 1991/92 in the Transdnistrian region was brought to an end by an agreement reached in July 1992 between the Presidents of Moldova and Russia which provided for an immediate ceasefire and the creation of a demilitarised Security Zone. This included a Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF) consisting of Russian, Moldovan and Transdnistrian troops, and a Joint Control Commission overseeing it. Shortly afterwards, in 1993, the OSCE Mission to Moldova was established with a mandate aimed at facilitating "the achievement of a lasting, comprehensive political settlement of the conflict in all its aspects"⁵.

Apart from conducting regular checks on the Security Zone, the Mission developed a whole series of activities aimed at promoting cooperation and confidence building between both sides, covering such areas as human rights and democracy building, media freedom, as well as anti-trafficking and gender equality.

A negotiating process was established, now commonly referred to as the "5+2 Process", since the addition in 2005 to the sides (Republic of Moldova and Transdnistria), and the mediators (Russia, Ukraine, OSCE) of the EU and US as observers. The talks were suspended in 2006.

It was only in September of 2011, during the OSCE Chairpersonship of Lithuania, that agreement was reached at a meeting of all participants in Moscow to resume the talks. The first round following the almost six year hiatus took place in Vilnius at the end of that year.

When Ireland took over the OSCE Chairpersonship in January 2012, it coincided with a change of leadership in Transdnistria, with Yevgeny Shevchuk replacing Igor Smirnov who had been in power for 20 years. The new leader adopted a less ideological and more pragmatic approach than his predecessor, which greatly facilitated intensified dialogue and gave significant momentum to the negotiating process.

The approach adopted by the Irish Chairpersonship was guided by some of the principles that drove other post conflict peace processes.

5 Mandate of the OSCE Mission to Moldova. <http://www.osce.org/moldova>

It included:

- creating a positive environment for the negotiations, conducive for an open dialogue and for developing a relationship of trust between the Chief Negotiators from both sides;
- gradually building on the established trust through a policy of small steps (“small incremental steps, rather than a giant leap forward”)⁶;
- highlighting the critical role that can be played by civil society organisations and the media during the ongoing process.

Thus it was that during the course of that year, Ireland chaired five rounds of negotiations, during which significant progress was made with the adoption of the principles and procedures for the conduct of the negotiations (the basic ground rules for the process such as recognition of equality of the sides in the negotiation process as well as the principle that “nothing is agreed until everything is agreed” - rules that are similar to those agreed in the Northern Ireland Peace Process which led to the 1998 Good Friday Agreement). An agenda was also agreed which divided the topics in three broad Helsinki Final Act inspired baskets:

- Socio economic issues;
- General legal and humanitarian issues and human rights;
- Comprehensive settlement, including institutional, political and security issues.

Combined with the increased rhythm of meetings between the Moldovan Prime Minister Mr. Filat and Mr. Shevchuk, this renewed momentum led to several confidence building measures being agreed between both sides, such as the resumption of rail freight and passenger services between Chisinau and Tiraspol and other measures aimed at removing obstacles to free movement and telecommunications.

The approach of the Irish Chairpersonship was to show that the greater the level of interaction between both sides of the Dniestr river, the better to demonstrate the advantages of working together, creating a sense of ownership in the process and highlighting the economic benefits which could accrue to each side.

A visit to the Northern Ireland peace process

The Irish Chairpersonship also invited the Chief Negotiators from both the Republic of Moldova and Transdnistria to visit Ireland and explore together the Northern Ireland peace process. It gave them an opportunity, during meetings in both Dublin and Belfast. to hear at first hand from those involved in the Northern Ireland peace process and the patience and perseverance that the process required. They also had time to get to know each other better and have bilateral discussions away from their own ‘comfort zones’.

Furthermore, in response to a joint request made to us by both the Prime Minister and Mr. Shevchuk, we hosted a gender balanced group of twenty civil society and media representatives to visit Dublin and Belfast. These were individuals who came from both sides of the river, with little opportunity to interact in their own

⁶ Statement by the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Foreign Minister Eamon Gilmore, at the opening of the “5+2” meeting in Dublin, February 2012.

environment.

The group listened to both political party representatives and civil servants who had been directly involved in the negotiations and who continued to serve in various capacities in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

The role of women in post-conflict peace negotiations, often sadly underestimated, was also underlined during the visit. The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was the only political party of its kind to gain representation in the peace negotiations and being elected to the First Legislative Assembly following the Good Friday Agreement.

The group also heard personal testimonials of former prisoners from both the Loyalist and Republican traditions now working together at local level in joint projects aimed at bridging the continuing divide between neighbouring communities, again building much needed trust along the way.

As it was difficult to deny the considerable progress made during the course of that year in the "5+2" process, the OSCE Ministerial Council, at its meeting in Dublin in December 2012 was able to reach consensus on a Ministerial Statement on the settlement process, the first of its kind in over 10 years. This represented a major achievement in itself and gave encouragement to the parties involved to continue their efforts. It laid the foundation for subsequent such Ministerial Council statements which continued until 2021.

Today, thirteen years later, the settlement process is still in place for better or worse. There have been some notable advancements building on the agreements reached in 2012, even if the process has been extremely slow with the Russian invasion of Ukraine obviously having a negative impact. Any advancement towards a final settlement will ultimately depend on when and on what conditions Russia will terminate its war against Ukraine.

By the mere fact of having an OSCE presence in the Republic of Moldova, the Organization is well placed to pursue its role of peace-building once this happens.

The Western Balkans

Any overview of the impact the OSCE has had on the European continent would not be complete without a mention of the significant role it played in the Western Balkan region following the break-up of Yugoslavia and the bloody wars that ensued. Whether it was in the implementation of the Dayton Accords of 1995 which brought the fighting to an end in Bosnia and Herzegovina or the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001 which provided a framework for peace and inter-ethnic reconciliation in the then Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (now formally known as North Macedonia following the Prespa Agreement of 2018 with Greece), it was the OSCE field operations that were instrumental in supporting the post conflict peace processes.

By deploying their expertise and rapid reaction capability, the OSCE field operations contributed to building strong institutions at national and local level and promoting democratic standards. With the entire region at various stages of their respective EU accession processes, the synergy developed between both the EU and the OSCE has been and remains particularly important. One has only to look at the added value which the OSCE field operations can bring to the EU in those areas, such as media freedom and the rights of national

minorities, where the latter lacks expertise.

During my mandate as EU Special Representative and Head of the EU Delegation in North Macedonia, I recall several examples which reflect the value of this cooperation. One of the areas of particular sensitivity related to the teaching of languages, a difficult subject at the best of times, not least in a multi-ethnic society such as North Macedonia. The High Commissioner on National Minorities at the time, Ambassador Knut Vollebaek developed an integrated education programme aimed at addressing this issue. Together with the Ambassador, we joined forces to convince the reluctant government led at the time by Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski to adopt this programme as official government policy. To ensure effective implementation at the national and local level, we brought in several civil society organisations working within local communities in promoting joint education projects involving teachers, families and the local authorities.

The role of civil society organisations

This example also highlights the critical importance of providing a space for civil society in a post conflict peace process. Civil society organisations are best placed to build bridges across the political divide and to create a climate of trust at the local level - where it matters most. Past experience of conflict resolution shows that women's rights groups are often in the forefront of these efforts. The examples offered by the implementation of the Northern Ireland peace process, and the post-apartheid reconciliation efforts in South Africa under the government of Nelson Mandela come to mind. Even if no two peace processes are alike, these examples provide a wealth of valuable expertise and show the benefits that can be gained from shared experiences.

It is in this respect all the more regrettable that many of the civil society organisations active in the Western Balkans are now facing existential challenges following the dismantlement by the Trump Administration of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), which provided vital financial support in areas of direct relevance to democracy building and human rights. Failure to fill the gap could lead to democratic backsliding and exacerbating an already fragile political and security environment in the Balkan region.

Conclusion

Not since the Second World War has Europe faced such existential threats to its security. Repeated violations of the norms and standards that we took for granted have weakened the multilateral institutions set up to defend them. It is no wonder therefore that in launching Finland's programme for 2025, the Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, emphasised its main priority will be "to ensure that our shared principles are not merely memories of the past but continue to guide us through these difficult times."⁷

So long as the Russian aggression against Ukraine continues it will be difficult to foresee the OSCE, as a consensus-based Organisation, being able to function normally. Yet, its ongoing work remains as vital as ever if only to ensure Russia's accountability for its continued violations of the Helsinki Final Act's core principles. Preparing the OSCE for the long term future will be equally important, so that it will be ready to fully resume its role once the political will of the participating States is restored.

7 Statement by Finnish Chairperson-in-Office, Minister for Foreign Affairs Elina Valtonen, to the OSCE Permanent Council, 23 January 2025

The OSCE Back to Square One? Rescuing the Organization from the Illusion of a CSCE-Revival

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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.

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

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.

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" 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 par-

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.*

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.

ticular, 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.

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

12 D. Suslov, *OSCE on Artificial Life Support or a Return to the CSCE?*, Valdai 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.

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 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 succes-

16 C. Nünlist, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

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', *eussia 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/>.

sor 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.

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 inter-governmental 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

22 A. Koziol 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>.

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>.

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.

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

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

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.

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.

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

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>.

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.

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 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’ 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

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

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.

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 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

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.

CSCE Character”.⁵⁴ While a complete return to the CSCE model carries significant 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

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

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.*

not there yet. “The OSCE has its past, it has its present, but it also has its future.”, United 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. Kinimont 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,

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 reimagined 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 reimagined 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 “reimagined 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 the one hand, is the imaginary associated with the "end of history," involving a self-referential morality and leading

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>

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 cooperate 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 commitments.

Furthermore, within the European Union, an unqualified attachment to our preferred narrative of events since

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.

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. 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.”

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

20 *The Nuclear Delusion*. 1982

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”).

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 rele-

21 https://roma.corriere.it/notizie/politica/25_marzo_18/papa-francesco-lettera-corriere-esclusiva-4917a7c9-d4ce-448f-981d-36e9b79dexplk.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.

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.

vance 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

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

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

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

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.

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

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

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.

What if the OSCE Did Not Exist?

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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.¹ 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 Matrix², 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.³ 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 mediator 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 deci-

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

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

sion-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”⁴. 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 deconfliction 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.

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 compet-

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

ing 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 19th 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.



The OSCE at 50: Staying Relevant in a Fragmenting World

Rasa Ostrauskaite

Rasa Ostrauskaite assumed the post of EU Permanent Representative to the OSCE in September 2020. Prior to this appointment, she served for one year as Head of Mission for the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) in Iraq.

Ms. Ostrauskaite has held a range of senior positions within the OSCE, including Director of the Transnational Threats Department and Deputy Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre's Policy Support Service. She has also worked extensively within the European Union, serving in the EU Council's Policy Planning and Early Warning Unit, as Political Adviser to the EU Special Representative (EUSR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Southern Caucasus, and as Senior Political Adviser to the EUSR for the Crisis in Georgia.

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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.



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.

Postscript

Walter Kemp and Christian Strohal

Walter Kemp is Director of Communications at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime and Senior Strategy Adviser at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, as well as editor of the journal *Security and Human Rights* and author of the book *Security through Cooperation*.

Christian Strohal is a retired Austrian diplomat, former Director of the OSCE-ODIHR (2003-2008), and former Ambassador of Austria to the OSCE. Since joining the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1976, he has focused on multilateral diplomacy, international security, humanitarian issues, and human rights. He has represented Austria in key international organizations, including the UN, OSCE, and the Council of Europe. A passionate advocate for human rights, he now supports think tanks, consults on international policy, and occasionally serves as an election observer.

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Postscript

During the period in which this volume was written and finalized, the world, and the OSCE, changed considerably. In addition to the war of aggression against Ukraine continuing into its fifth year, the USA and Israel launched a fully-fledged military operation against Iran in February 2026, the implications of which are yet to be seen. Other violent conflicts continue, often without prospects for an early resolution. The rule of law and the international system are under pressure. Alliances and assumptions are changing.

These serious challenges underline the need for peace, security, and cooperation between states based on commonly agreed principles, even when there is little trust. As a result, we hope that this special edition will not only recall the historical significance of the Helsinki Final Act and its contribution to fostering security and cooperation in Europe over the past half-century, but also inspire readers to seek more cooperative alternatives to the destructive policies that have harmed so many and caused disorder in the past few years, both within and outside the OSCE area .

The curtain has not gone down on the OSCE. Agreement on a Unified Budget in March 2026 – for the first time in five years – shows that consensus is possible, even in difficult times. An organisation like the OSCE is badly needed to prevent, reduce and control conflicts in Europe, manage relations between states, and to provide a common framework to discuss the future of European security. The OSCE could also play a useful role in building peace after the war in Ukraine.

This publication contains a number of suggestions indicating possible ways forward. We encourage readers to put forward their own ideas, both through this journal and its website.

Christian Strohal and Walter Kemp

This issue 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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