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# *Leap of faith for the OSCE?*

Ahead of the critical Ministerial Council in Skopje





The Helsinki Final Act, signed on 1 August 1975, is widely considered the most important outcome of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Almost 50 years after this historic agreement, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which carries the torch of the Helsinki Final Act, finds itself confronted with a deep crisis of European Security. This crisis affects all organisations dealing with security in Europe. However, the OSCE as a consensus-based organisation of non-like-minded states is hit harder than NATO or EU.

### ***What is at stake?***

Over the past 15 years, the OSCE's role as a platform for dialogue has been coming under growing pressure. In the context of a severe deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, which came to a head after Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the OSCE has become increasingly hamstrung.

In 2022 the OSCE's Polish chair introduced a policy of 'no business as usual' after Russia's attack. This policy, strongly supported by the majority of the organisation's 57 participating States, was adopted as a political message to spotlight the urgent need to adapt the OSCE's role as an institutionalised multilateral process in response to Russia's actions.

### **An organisation without a budget**

The political polarisation between Russia and the West has severely curtailed the OSCE's capacity to act. 'No business as usual' is on the verge of turning 'no business at all'. Russia (and occasionally other states) has consistently used the consensus principle, which governs all substantive OSCE decisions, to block key decisions. Similarly, giving in to any of Russia's demands is unacceptable for a number of participating States, which see compromise for consensus' sake as appeasement of an aggressor.

Consequently, for the past two years the OSCE has had to struggle on without a commonly agreed budget. This has severely limited the operational capabilities of its executive structures, which

include the OSCE Secretariat, the three autonomous institutions (the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media) and the organisation's field operations in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

### **A looming leadership void**

Besides the budget crisis, there's an impending leadership crisis, as it is still unclear which country will succeed North Macedonia as OSCE chair in 2024. While Finland's candidature for OSCE chair in 2025 received consensus at the 2021 Ministerial Council in Stockholm, Russia rejected Estonia's bid for 2024. Moreover, the mandates of the OSCE Secretary General and the heads of the three autonomous institutions run out in early December. Last but not least, to remain operational most OSCE field operations need their mandates renewed by year end.

### **Critical meeting in Skopje**

While to date the OSCE has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability, the interim administrative and organisational measures are hardly sustainable. Many thus see the upcoming Ministerial Council in Skopje on 30 November and 1 December as existential for the OSCE. Urgent progress is needed on the organisation's budget and leadership. The OSCE's ability even to muddle through might soon fail if the Ministerial Council finds no solution to the current political impasse. Lacking a chair, a Secretary General and a budget, the OSCE's political paralysis could lead to an operational standstill. This would deprive Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security of one of the most refined, albeit currently underused, toolboxes for tackling conflicts, tensions and instability.

### ***The OSCE - an underestimated organisation with huge potential***

Although the OSCE is still widely perceived as indispensable for a rules-based international order, much of its potential remains untapped for political



reasons. Throughout the organisation's history, its participating States have adopted a wide range of commitments and principles pertaining to the military-political, the economic and environmental and the human dimensions of security. As the world's largest regional security organisation under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, the OSCE aims at the prevention and peaceful resolution of both inter- and intra-state conflicts. Fundamental to the organisation's work is a recognition that causes of conflict may arise in all three dimensions of security, including border disputes between participating States, political and socio-economic instability, environmental degradation and climate-related security risks, violations of human and minority rights, or failures of good governance and the rule of law.

The OSCE's huge potential derives from its multi-dimensional approach to security and its role as a platform for multilateral dialogue and problem-solving. Its diverse organisational set-up and comprehensive toolbox enable the OSCE to engage cross-dimensionally in different phases of the conflict cycle. The long-term programmatic work of its executive structures, especially its field operations, allow the OSCE to address root causes of conflict and instability. To that end, the organisation engages with government agencies and ministries of participating States, public administrations, civil society and NGOs, as well as other international and regional organisations. The OSCE also has the capacity for short-term operational prevention through early warning and early action to stop conflicts from escalating into violent crises.

Given the co-existence of conflicts of different levels of intensity throughout the OSCE area, it is a major OSCE asset that its executive structures can engage concurrently in conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation in the same region or even the same country. Accordingly, until early 2022, the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) fulfilled a range of crisis management tasks in eastern Ukraine to facilitate implementation of the Minsk Agreements, while a Special Representative of the OSCE chair took charge of conflict resolution efforts in the Trilateral Contact Group format.

Simultaneously, the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine (PCUK) supported its host country with long-term capacity- and institution-building.

### ***OSCE engagement in Ukraine***

Following Russia's attack against Ukraine last February, both the SMM and the PCUK had to be closed down, as Moscow rejected any further extension of their mandates. Nonetheless, the OSCE continues to assist Kyiv with capacity- and institution-building through its Support Programme for Ukraine (SPU). Launched in November 2022, the SPU is based on extrabudgetary contributions and includes projects aimed to help Ukraine to tackle the war's serious challenges to civilians. Moreover, the OSCE chair has appointed a Special Representative – Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine to engage with local stakeholders. SPU implementation is inevitably fraught with difficulty in war-torn Ukraine.

While still active in Ukraine, the OSCE thus lacks a more immediate political and operational role in crisis management, and the question arises of what such a role might look like in the future. Some inspiration can be drawn from other international actors in Ukraine, such as the UN, which teamed up with Turkey to facilitate the Black Sea grain deal between Kyiv and Moscow, or the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which has deployed monitors at Ukraine's nuclear facilities.

Emulating the UN and the IAEA, the OSCE could, with the consent of the conflict parties, engage in crisis management to help alleviate the war's immense humanitarian consequences. The SMM's experience could be used as a reference point. During its deployment from 2014 to 2022, the Mission facilitated a substantial number of local 'windows of silence', which allowed for the repair and maintenance of critical civilian infrastructure on both sides of the contact line in eastern Ukraine.

Additionally, if the current situation stabilises, and a ceasefire is agreed at some point in the future, the SMM's expertise in monitoring and verification could support the implementation of any agreement. To that end, the OSCE might work alongside a UN mission or at least under the aegis of a UN Security



Council resolution. Finally, the OSCE could make a substantive contribution to international post-conflict rehabilitation, once the war is over. The organisation's long-standing experience in post-crisis settings, such as the Balkans, would certainly come in handy.

### ***In defence of OSCE conflict management***

The war against Ukraine is clearly the OSCE's top priority, but it faces a number of protracted conflicts in its area. There are, for instance, the Geneva International Discussions, which were established after the 2008 conflict in Georgia and are co-chaired by the OSCE, the EU and the UN. There is also the mediation role of a Special Representative of the OSCE Chair and the OSCE Mission to Moldova in the Transdniestrian settlement process.

In addition to these high-profile conflict settings, the OSCE is involved in conflict management and resolution efforts in many other situations. Related activities, carried out by field operations at the local or community level, for instance in the Balkans, often go unnoticed, despite their important contribution to human security and sustainable peace.

Regardless of such hidden success stories, the organisation is increasingly viewed in some quarters as a 'paper tiger', essentially incapable of making good on its commitments and averting violent conflict. But this ignores the reality that the OSCE is after all an institutionalised political process without enforcement or sanctioning instruments. The OSCE is only as strong as its participating States allow it to be. At the end of the day, it is the participating States' responsibility to comply with the commitments and principles they have agreed to.

The OSCE has a comprehensive toolbox as its disposal. But it is in urgent need of adequate resources to implement its operations, coupled with the political will of participating States to deploy its instruments. The OSCE stands ready to help conflict parties caught in an escalatory spiral and genuinely seeking a peaceful resolution. Where there's a will, there's a way, and the OSCE can facilitate it. By contrast, the OSCE is ultimately powerless if a conflict party resorts to violence and will not be

dissuaded. That said, reproaching the OSCE in such situations follows the same flawed logic as blaming those monitoring a ceasefire for violations committed by the parties that signed up to it.

### ***The OSCE in the future – an organisation worth fighting for***

The OSCE's strategic value for Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security must not be neglected or discarded. The organisation's work and its acquis remain essential to the promotion of a rules-based international order and peaceful resolution of conflicts through multilateral engagement. The commitments and principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act and other milestone CSCE/OSCE agreements form its continuous basis. Violations do not render them irrelevant or useless – quite the contrary.

In addition to conflicts in the OSCE area, there are violent crises and (growing) tensions in neighbouring regions, including the Mediterranean, the Middle and Far East, as well as the Asia-Pacific. All of them affect Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security in one way or another. The OSCE provides a framework for addressing such challenges in a cooperative or at least coordinated manner. In addition, the organisation can support efforts to tackle the regional, national and local implications of global security challenges, such as increasingly pressing security risks related to climate change.

The OSCE is often called an 'organisation of the non-likeminded', and Russia's war against Ukraine has obviously propelled non-likemindedness to new levels. Nevertheless, to date no participating State, even Russia, has called to disband the OSCE. Keeping the organisation alive seems to be the lowest common denominator, at least for the time being. However, keeping the OSCE alive but in a state of political and operational paralysis is not enough. What are needed urgently are political will and diplomatic finesse that pave the way to reactivate the OSCE. The most important immediate step is to move forward at the Ministerial Council in Skopje and avert any further deepening of the budgetary and looming leadership crises.



It is understandable that participating States opposed to Russia's war against Ukraine want to use the OSCE as a platform to denounce it and to hold Moscow accountable for its behaviour. However, it is exactly because of the OSCE's nature as an 'organisation of the non-likeminded' that it should be possible to display national decisiveness in support of Ukraine while at the same time ensuring that 'no business as usual' at the political level does not turn into 'no business at all' at the operational one. Achieving progress on the budget together with Moscow or reaching agreement with it on next year's chair should not be seen as appeasement, but instead as a 'leap of faith' for the sake of the OSCE. Accordingly, a balance must be found between adherence to a principled stance towards Russia's actions and pragmatic approaches securing the OSCE's future as a functional organisation with a chance of realising its potential. That said, any compromise requires pragmatism on all sides, which means that Russia has to play ball as well.

Losing the OSCE or permanently sidelining it would be a major loss for human security across its area. Moreover, it would deprive its participating

States of an inclusive platform for dialogue and a comprehensive toolbox for multilateral action. Alternative formats offering the same organisational and operational assets are hard to come by. Building them up would require immense efforts, as well as substantial political capital and financial resources. Investing in the OSCE is much less costly than unwinding it. It is an organisation worth fighting for.

### *About the author*

**Christos Katsioulis** is the Director of the FES Regional Office for International Cooperation in Vienna. Previously he founded and headed the FES Office in Athens, later he headed the EU Office in Brussels as well as the London Office of FES. Christos has been a regular commentator on European affairs in the German as well as international media and a regular contributor for the journal *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft*.

## ***The FES office in Vienna***

Established in 2016, the FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) addresses today's profound challenges to European security. It also works closely with the OSCE towards revitalising cooperative security. Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was a watershed moment for security in Europe and has rendered obsolete previous visions of European order. A new Cold War or even more unstable relations between Russia and the West are the probable outcome of this war, creating an environment of confrontation and containment in Europe. At the same time, planetary challenges such as climate change or pandemics continue to threaten peace and security and require cooperative approaches. In these uncertain times, FES ROCPE continues to develop new ideas under the aegis of solution-oriented policymaking, together with experts, politicians and policy planners from Eastern Europe, Russia, the EU and the US. The aim is to tackle interconnected security challenges, contribute to conflict resolution and strengthen the idea of common and indivisible security in Europe in the spirit of the Paris and Istanbul Charters (1990/1999). It is our belief that organisations such as the FES have a responsibility to come up with new ideas and to introduce them into the political process in Europe.

Our activities include:

- » regional and international workshops aimed at developing new concepts on stabilising the security situation in Europe, dealing with conflicts and achieving lasting peace in Europe;
- » maintaining a regional network of young professionals working on de-escalation, cooperation and peace in Europe;
- » regular public opinion polling on security matters;
- » cooperation with the OSCE in the three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental, and the human.

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