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Regional Trends in European Security

Recommendations for the OSCE



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Introduction

European security has been in a deep and profound crisis since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022. International organisations that aim to foster multilateral cooperation, first and foremost the OSCE, took a hard hit as a result.

The trends and possible developments of European security were the focus of a debate at an OSCE conference organised in Skopje by the North Macedonian OSCE Chairman-in-Office, the OSCE Secretariat and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) on 13 and 14 November. The two expert panels organised by FES focussed specifically on sub-regional trends and their repercussions for European security. The following sections summarise the most significant security trends in different OSCE regions identified and discussed by the two panels. The policy brief closes with corresponding recommendations for the OSCE and highlights the need for cooperation in an age of polarisation.

Trends in European security

EU and Central Europe

In recent years, and accelerated by Russia's war against Ukraine, the EU has stepped up its engagement with peace and security, through direct action, common approaches in international organisations and funding. The EU member states form the largest group within the OSCE and contribute around 70% of its budget. Developments inside the EU thus have a significant impact on the OSCE.

Fissures between EU member states

For more than 20 months the EU has pursued a unified response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but the longer the war drags on, the harder it may be to maintain consensus among EU members on continued military and financial aid. Ukraine still enjoys overwhelming support, but polls show that sending more arms there polarises societies. European public opinion may become weary of the war and its costs, and the rise of populists could undermine political unity. Recent election results in Slovakia and the Netherlands represent a warning.

The biggest test of European unity may be the issue of EU enlargement. This would have to be accompanied by institutional reform, possibly introducing qualified majority voting, reducing the number of Commissioners and strengthening accountability, justice and the rule of law. As things stand, there seems to be no consensus among EU member states on starting accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova. This poses a dilemma: Ukraine has now been "internalised" into European politics, and it is politically unthinkable for the EU to abandon it. But the way forward is unclear. Nor is there any clarity concerning the accession prospects of the six Balkan countries, which have been in the "waiting room" for 20 years.

Low external credibility for the EU

EU member states pursue divergent and sometimes diametrically opposed foreign policy positions, as evidenced by the vote on the UN Gaza resolution on 27 October (nine in favour, three against and fifteen abstentions). The EU's handling of the Israel– Hamas war underlines its foreign policy shortcomings and the fragmentation of the European institutional framework. Its persistent weaknesses as a cohesive actor have seriously damaged the EU's image and credibility in most of the world. This affects perceptions of the EU as a block within a consensus-based organisation such as the OSCE.

In addition, the outlook for cooperation in European defence seems unpromising. Russia's war against Ukraine motivated implementation of the European Peace Facility for collective arms acquisition and the facilitation of equipment transit by neutral nations such as Austria. It also clarified the division of labour between NATO and the EU on defence matters. The years-long quarrels around duplication are over. NATO is the institution for collective defence, whereas the EU supports its member states in bolstering their national defence capabilities. There is an issue with the European defence industry, however. The current process of strengthening European defence capabilities has suffered from a lack of reciprocity and respective investment in European systems. The EU has instead been purchasing equipment from the United States. This practice will have a lasting impact on the EU's long-term action and independence.



Southern and South-Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean

The European institutions' disunited approach to South and South-Eastern Europe both exposes and exacerbates fractures in European societies and politics, risking the potential isolation of Southern European countries in their interactions with the Mediterranean region, as well as the detachment of disillusioned EU candidate nations and their societies from the EU.

Informalisation and externalisation practices in the EU

In terms of crisis management, EU member states have been turning increasingly either to informal groups or agreements outside the EU's legal framework, as evident in the Normandy format or the EU–Turkey migration deal (informalisation), or to organisations external to the EU, such as the OSCE with its Special Monitoring Mission in its crucial role during the Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea (externalisation). These trends can result in a reliance on non-democratic actors in close proximity to the EU. Some of Italy's agreements exemplify these practices, including the €1 billion agreement with Tunisia to tackle irregular migration and the migration agreement with Albania. The effectiveness of these agreements over time is disputed because partner countries may use migration as a tool against Europe. Unfortunately, some participating States do not pay OSCE experiences with combating human trafficking sufficient heed when addressing these issues. The broader implications are potential risks to the EU's capacity to provide security effectively in a world of high-power politics and a fragile global liberal order.

Stalled EU integration

Since the 2000s, not only has the EU been an economic actor in the Balkans, but the prospect of EU membership has acted as a stabilising force and a catalyst for reform for the countries of the region. However, the EU's recent disengagement and passivity on enlargement have harmed its standing as a credible future prospect for the candidate countries in the Balkans, but also Turkey. The absence of tangible EU membership prospects

fosters Euroscepticism, particularly among younger generations, and allows Chinese and Russian influence to grow. This may undermine reform efforts and contribute to destabilisation. Unresolved national disputes and nationalist narratives are increasing cause for concern, especially in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which remain the weakest points in regional security.

Northern Europe

The Nordic states' primary security concern is the possibility of Russian success in Ukraine. The Northern European nations are dedicated to supporting Ukraine politically, militarily and economically as part of a broader Western strategy. They repeatedly stressed the significance of regional security and stability through the OSCE prior to Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO as there was no shared arms control mechanism in the Nordic region. They have also called consistently for enhanced coordination between EU peace-building initiatives and the OSCE, and have supported the organisation with common efforts towards comprehensive security.

Alignment in Nordic states' security

The Nordic region has aligned its security with the NATO accession of formerly militarily non-aligned Finland and Sweden and non-EU members Iceland and Norway lining up with EU sanctions on Russia. NATO enlargement will enhance North European defence integration, including air power, headquarters and maritime operations, and enable more coordination and joint planning.

As a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Nordic countries in close proximity to Russia have cancelled or frozen almost all bilateral relations with it. This applies in most areas, including the economy (investors have pulled out, sanctions have been imposed), politics (no contact except minimum diplomatic relations), culture, sport and science (no exchanges or interactions), and social relations (no more people-to-people activities or friendship cities, for example). Russia's nuclear arsenal is considered a threat. China is viewed as a staunch political supporter of Putin. Recent incidents, such as the destruction of the Balticconnector gas pipeline, attributed to a Chinese vessel, raise concerns



over China's support for Putin's administration and potential non-combat contributions to the war against Ukraine. This illustrates the trend in Northern Europe – but also other regions – of growing securitisation of supply chains, trade, investments and critical infrastructure.

The Arctic: impacts of climate change

Climate change is affecting the Arctic region at an alarming rate compared with other regions. Temperature increases in the Arctic are two or three times higher than the global average, affecting indigenous livelihoods, fisheries and critical industries. Thawing permafrost threatens infrastructure. The challenge lies in the possibility that geopolitical tensions will undercut collective solutions or responses to climate change. Coming out on top in the contest between democracies and autocracies at the expense of climate security can hardly be called a victory.

Trans-Atlantic region

NATO, the world's largest military alliance, has undoubtedly been revitalised and strengthened by Russia's war against Ukraine. Although some uncertainty surrounds America's future involvement in European defence, the United States is tied into Europe not least through the OSCE. The same applies to the post-Brexit United Kingdom. Within the OSCE framework, the United States prioritises strengthening the rule of law, democracy and human rights, as well as tackling emerging security threats, such as terrorism and human trafficking.

Strengthening of NATO

The effective joint responses to recent challenges, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and Russia's war against Ukraine, have reinforced the value of the transatlantic alliance. NATO has gained new members and secured increased defence spending commitments from Alliance members, including historically cautious ones such as Germany. The United States prioritises collaboration with allied partners to tackle the challenges posed by Russia, Iran and North Korea, as well as counter-terrorism. The US also views NATO as indispensable for managing relations with China to prevent competition from escalating into conflict.

US internal divergence

A particular danger to unity in transatlantic relations is the fragmented domestic political leadership in the United States, which former Defense Secretary Robert Gates has labelled a "dysfunctional superpower". This internal divide has generated feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability among transatlantic partners during a vital period that requires collaboration to address shared challenges. While it's unlikely that the US will withdraw from European security – underpinned by their active engagement in the OSCE – there's a chance it may reduce its commitment, urging European allies to step up in collective defence. A crucial test will be the establishment of an EU rapid deployment force by 2025, as outlined in the Strategic Compass.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia

For decades, Eastern Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia have experienced persistent conflicts and long-standing territorial disputes. Furthermore, non-democratic regimes in some of the countries have posed challenges to regional security by instigating social unrest.

Russia's destabilising role

Russia, which historically has considered its neighbourhood to be its proper sphere of influence, has often interfered in the affairs of the former Soviet republics, directly or indirectly. This includes strengthening links with authoritarian regimes, fuelling conflicts and hindering solutions, for example by sidelining the Minsk Group in the Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process or by obstructing renewal of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine in 2022. Russia's direct military aggression against Ukraine encompasses numerous violations of international law and has brought OSCE decision-making processes to a standstill.

Increasing focus on Central Asian states

Sharing borders with Iran and Afghanistan, the Central Asian nations have a critical role in addressing security issues, such as counteracting drug trafficking and terrorism. In light of Russia's declining power in the region, Western OSCE participating states are increasingly focusing



on Central Asian states, also recognising their importance in backing sanctions against Russia. Concurrently, China is stepping up cooperation with Central Asian states through bilateral agreements and financial aid. At the same time, Central Asia is the scene of recurrent cross-border disputes and inter-ethnic violence, as well as civil unrest, whose suppression by security forces erodes trust between authorities and population. This presents the OSCE with an opportunity to serve as a platform for regional dialogue between disputing states or communities, but also between state authorities and civil society.

Climate security

The climate and security nexus tightens

International collaboration on climate change is crucial given the transnational nature of climate security risks. These risks not only cover transnational threats due to physical connections between countries, but also impact other interstate links, such as global trade and flows of capital and people. On a global scale, potential threats may arise as a result of emerging and currently underexplored geo-engineering technologies. Climate change challenges are exacerbated by armed conflicts and unequal distribution of global resources, as exemplified by the global food crisis arising from Russia's war in Ukraine.

The OSCE's growing role in climate security

The OSCE has a mandate to address climate change-related security concerns, but its full potential in this area has yet to be realised. Whereas in the past, environmental issues were dealt with largely within the OSCE's Economic and Environmental Dimension, such as cooperation on transboundary water management, there is now increasing acknowledgement of the importance of the climate–security nexus. This was identified by the OSCE in its 2021 MC Decision on Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change, which urges OSCE participating States to intensify cooperation in promoting climate resilience, adaptation and mitigation. It is noteworthy that this decision received unanimous support in December 2021 in the run up to Russia's war against Ukraine, while at the same time, Russia

blocked a UN Security Council draft resolution on climate change as a threat to peace.

The OSCE is increasingly focusing on climate change, as demonstrated by recent events and activities, such as the 2023 OSCE High-Level Conference on Climate Change. Several climate security projects launched by the OSCE in recent years are extra-budgetary, including the 2020 project Strengthening Responses to Security Risks from Climate Change in South-Eastern Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

Summarising trends

The OSCE, the world's largest regional security organisation, faces a number of challenges. These challenges affect the OSCE's ability to shape and influence the security of people in the region.

First, Russia is turning its back on the Helsinki Principles and becoming a destabilising factor in many OSCE subregions. Many observers are concerned not only by the full-scale war against Ukraine, but also by Russian influence in the Balkans and its role in the Arctic region.

Second, and as a consequence, there is a growing polarisation between the countries perceived as the collective West and Russia that affects the OSCE, but also other institutions, such as NATO and the EU. This leaves other countries in a position in which their options are limited by simplistic viewpoints that do not reflect their interests. NATO reinforces its defences against Russia, while the EU takes a similar position in other policy areas, such as the economy and trade, contributing to a polarised perception of European security. The consequences include a highly militarised contact zone between NATO and Russia, and further economic decoupling of the EU from Belarus and Russia. This trend is highlighted by Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO and Denmark's decision to participate in the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy.

Third, polarisation and stronger cohesion in the West contrast with emerging fissures inside organisations and even societies that urgently require attention. European cohesion on sanctions against Russia, as well as a path towards EU membership for Ukraine are one side of the coin. The other is the



lack of clarity concerning how to make good on the membership promise, with disunity emerging even before the crucial EU summit. EU member states' positioning towards the escalation in the Middle East is another indication of the difficulties they find in reaching a common foreign policy stance. This comes on top of the cracks already emerging in Western societies on forming a united front in supporting Ukraine against Russia. The elections in Slovakia and the Netherlands are just precursors of the much-anticipated US presidential elections in late 2024.

Fourth, the increasing importance of Central Asia for European security is an overarching trend. The region's significance has been heightened by increasing global polarisation, and viewed by some as part of broader geopolitical developments. Central Asia is part of the OSCE region that borders directly on China and Russia, forming a global crossroads that cannot be neglected.

Finally, some major security trends transcend the polarising security landscape in Europe and pose challenges to countries and societies across the OSCE region. Climate security is one such trend, affecting Central Asia every bit as much as the Arctic. This runs contrary to the prevailing perception of confrontational security and serves as a reminder to all OSCE participating States that cooperative security remains an option.

Recommendations for the OSCE

The OSCE is a unique forum for tackling common security challenges in Eurasia and the Euro-Atlantic space. The deep crisis of European security also impacts the organisation itself, limiting its political room for manoeuvre and constraining application of its instruments. As the current situation has shown, however, there are steps the OSCE and its participating States could take to pursue a more active and impactful role in tackling European security's many challenges.

To begin with the last trend, there is potential for the OSCE to focus on aspects of security that pervade the diverse group of 57 participating States. The effects of climate change on security are felt throughout the OSCE region and their cross-border nature is undisputed. The OSCE must utilise its potential as

a “convening power” to unite stakeholders, through advocacy coalitions and informal groups, beyond formal organisation. Focusing on climate security within the OSCE offers a chance to shift attention towards a security concern that is less politically charged and indeed must be addressed eventually. Delaying action on climate change will only make things worse. Moreover, at a challenging time for European security, climate change action will also produce positive results for cooperation, especially when joint action on other issues is limited.

The OSCE should work on a more institutional and comprehensive framework to **tackle climate change-related challenges**. This may include integrating climate considerations into conflict prevention, using early warning systems for resource-related tensions, developing a guide for participating States for assessing national security impacts, developing effective risk management and appointing an environmental liaison officer to enhance collaboration between participating States, OSCE bodies, local stakeholders and other international organisations. Strengthening joint action to combat climate change can be seen as an opportunity for the OSCE in the current European security crisis.

Participating States, specifically those supporting a rules-based international order, should try to insulate the OSCE from the effects of further political polarisation in Europe. As already outlined, **the OSCE's future relies on sustained interest from EU and NATO member states**. While the EU and its member states are justified in condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, they should avoid resorting to virtue signalling, which may hinder constructive engagement. Formerly overlooked OSCE regions, such as Central Asia, and persistent security threats must not be neglected. Letting “no business as usual” turn into “no business at all” must be avoided as the organisation might simply cease functioning. The growing contestation between democratic and autocratic nations should not take priority over measures targeted at shared long-term challenges, such as climate change. The comprehensive security at the core of the OSCE, bringing together human rights, protection of minorities, media freedom, economic development and political-military issues, should be the guiding light.



The credibility of the rules-based approach hinges on eliminating double standards. **Participating States “west of Vienna” should thus strive to address their own democratic deficits**, including the increasing prevalence of populism, violations of the rule of law, and infringements of media freedom. Such efforts would not only improve their societies’ resilience but also counter accusations of double standards and enhance their legitimacy.

It must be acknowledged that OSCE participating States may have different perceptions of the values enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act, while **sharing common interests**. These include the fight against climate change (see above) and arms control. To address these and other common issues, participating States should build on flexible coalitions and be open to cooperation with non-likeminded states. With regard to arms control, for example, the OSCE can identify a common consensus-based framework of operations and safeguard stability. Even at times of broken trust basic tenets of cooperative security should hold.

Despite the current crisis, the OSCE should come out of the shadows. It is more than a regular gathering of diplomats in Vienna. Governments of the participating States should **communicate more effectively about the OSCE’s importance and operations on the ground, as well as its success stories**. Examples include organising elections in Kosovo 2017, the work of field missions, and systematic engagement with young people and inclusion of their perspectives in the OSCE’s activities. In this way the organisation can enhance visibility of its capabilities, potential and actions among key actors of European security, civil society and business.

Looking to the future, OSCE diplomacy needs **more administrative flexibility and creativity**. The organisation has already demonstrated its ability to mobilise funds when consensus is hard to reach, for instance by pooling voluntary financial contributions for the “Support Programme Ukraine” to combat human trafficking, corruption and environmental damage, among others.. More creative approaches may be needed. Participating States might consider introducing three-year budgets, or nominating two to three chairs in advance. This would also help to disentangle decisions on top personnel, budgets and

chairs. This may lower the pressure and diminish the chance that certain administrative issues could be taken hostage (especially the budget). The organisation could strengthen strategic planning within the Secretariat and better use the mandates already agreed upon, including many activities financed by extra-budgetary contributions.

Despite the gravity of our current circumstances it is important to look beyond them and consider the OSCE’s potential. The OSCE’s on-the-ground experience and its refined toolbox for conflict management will be critical in stabilising the situation should hostilities in Ukraine abate. It will also play a vital role in providing human security in conflict-torn regions, whether through demining, promoting post-conflict rehabilitation, establishing the rule of law, and fostering human rights and equality. European security’s long-term prospects are founded on a comprehensive combination of the OSCE’s three dimensions of security (political-military, economic and environmental, and human security). European security trends indicate a more difficult and contested landscape. An experienced and seasoned organisation is thus needed to manage the upcoming challenges.

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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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