

# DIALOGUE FOR OSCE RENEWAL – SHIFTING SECURITY BACK TO THE PEOPLE

*The OSCE is the largest regional security organization globally, but a common understanding of the institution and the security it seeks to promote has been in decline since roughly 2008. The war in Ukraine and renewed Russian invasion in February 2022 have led many to ask how to sustain the OSCE past 2022. One of the conflicts at the core of the OSCE's current and existing malaise is the question of what the OSCE of today symbolizes. Ahead of the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2025, we argue that better incorporation of the perspectives of civil society on the ground may help revive a genuinely comprehensive vision of the OSCE. This approach would allow for shifting away from compartmentalized security and open discussion for different perceptions or how to combine different perceptions of security.*

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### *European Security Dialogue and the OSCE*

Within the CSCE/OSCE context, conceptions of ‘security’ and how states should conduct relations have historically helped define common principles of European security. However, which principles should take priority have been debated since their inception in 1975, with ambiguous wording allowing different parties to interpret how principles relate to each other advantageously.

This ambiguity allowed for coexistence during the Cold War. During the post-Cold War period, this ‘constructive ambiguity’ was replaced by a predominantly Western, liberal reading. Alongside creative arms control agreements, this led to a new emphasis on human rights issues as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe became an entire organization in 1994 and the OSCE.

These disputes over security perceptions and values have been, at times, part of an elite-driven conversation. This has led to numerous summit declarations and renewed attempts to spark a cooperative spirit that originated during the original CSCE process of Cold War Détente. However, these elite projects for OSCE revival have seemingly devolved into geopolitical dead-ends in the last decade.

Before Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, European leaders such as Finnish President Sauli Niinistö proposed a need for ongoing dialogue and trust-building, markedly outside the OSCE format. There is concern that the OSCE, with all its political and procedural limitations, may not be the best format to promote European security.

We propose in this article that shifting focus from an elite discussion on security to further incorporating societal actors’ perspectives may put the OSCE back on the path to finding a common understanding of security in the OSCE region. This idea complements existing civil-society initiatives for revitalizing OSCE principles like the Sakharov Centre’s Reviving the Spirit of Helsinki 2025 initiative. Our draft proposal attempts to envision a dialogue that emphasizes a variety of civil-society definitions of security. What defines security should not be prescribed from the coffee houses of Vienna.

Somewhat counterintuitively, we argue that by incorporating grassroots voices from the South Caucasus and Central Asia, a more amicable discussion may arise for governments East of Vienna. As Wolfgang Zellner highlighted in 2017, “the OSCE’s ties to civil society actors are mostly limited to the human dimension and thus represent an underused potential.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 2 Wolfgang Zellner, “Old and New Challenges for the OSCE,” In: IFSH (ed.) OSCE Yearbook 2016, *Baden-Baden* (2017), pp. 33–44.

### *Minding but Bridging the Security Perception Gap*

One of the conflicts at the core of the OSCE's current and existing malaise is the question of what the OSCE of today symbolizes. The post-2008 OSCE has shown that any common understanding of the institution and the security it seeks to promote was in decline.

In 2007, it was pointed out that there was no agreement on norms of human rights and democracy. The OSCE was entering “a crisis of both political substance and moral legitimacy.”<sup>2</sup> In such a conflictual environment, is it worth pursuing a forced implementation of a shared understanding despite ample evidence that OSCE values are no longer shared universally?

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Western leaders want the OSCE to symbolize the liberal status quo established in the 1990s. In this respect, CSCE/OSCE is seen through the history of the promotion and success<sup>3</sup> of human rights politics.<sup>4</sup> This narrative was solidified by the end of the Cold War and Gorbachev's acceptance that the CSCE principle of human rights had precedent over the sanctity of internal affairs at the 1991 Human Dimension implementation meeting hosted in Moscow.

The CSCE thus institutionalized into the OSCE under the auspices of the Charter of Paris,<sup>5</sup> where a Europe whole and free would be based on market economies and democratic values. New institutions were built to implement these new, momentarily uncontroversial commitments in the former Warsaw Pact and Newly Independent

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<sup>2</sup> 3 Wolfgang Zellner, “Identifying the Cutting Edge: The Future Impact of the OSCE”, *Centre for OSCE Research*, (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel C. Thomas, “The Helsinki Effect: International Norms, Human Rights, and the Demise of Communism”, *Princeton University Press*, (2001).

<sup>4</sup> Sarah B. Snyder, “From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy”, *Columbia University Press*, (2018).

<sup>5</sup> Charter of Paris for a New Europe, (1990). <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf>

States – all CSCE members as of 1992. Accepting Europe’s idea of modernity and civilization via OSCE values was seen as a way to rid new nations of their Soviet past.

Alexander Graef and Ulrich Kühn argue that for there to be peace, the West might need to stop pretending that these times are still the 1990s.<sup>6</sup> A continuation of a 1990s mindset and its further calcification due to the reinvasion of Ukraine may prove helpful in domestic political agendas but, in specific conceptualizations, is counter to the spirit of the OSCE.

Cornelius Friesendorf and Stefan Wolff argue that “the Cold War taught us that dialogue on mutual interests, such as preventing avoidable wars, is a vital complement to deterrence and defense.”<sup>7</sup> Maintaining and even strengthening the OSCE would mitigate the risk of a new divide in Europe between those in NATO and those outside. The difficulty is that not all dialogue is equal, and the direction of discussion will help define a renewed OSCE.

### ***Security According to the OSCE – Pick and Choose***

The last OSCE meeting held at a heads-of-States level took place in December 2010 and reconfirmed the common principles of European security. The Astana summit was preceded by Russian proposals for renewed dialogue on European security in 2008-2009.<sup>8</sup> Though unsuccessful, they gave a platform to OSCE states who wanted to push back against a perceived hegemony of Western human security values in the OSCE<sup>9</sup> and paralleled growing ‘post-liberal’ sentiment in the region.<sup>10</sup>

As a result, security at the OSCE, though rhetorically coherent, became characterized as a *smörgåsbord* where participating States have been able to promote certain aspects that fit their perceptions. This philosophy has thus allowed participating States to let certain commitments go unaddressed under the premise of a new form of ‘constructive ambiguity’.

The West endorses the features of comprehensiveness, cooperation, and indivisibility

<sup>6</sup> Alexander Graef and Ulrich Kühn, “A Letter from Moscow: (In)divisible Security and Helsinki 2.0”, *War on the Rocks*, (14 February 2022). <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/a-letter-from-moscow-indivisible-security-and-helsinki-2-0/>

<sup>7</sup> Cornelius Friesendorf and Stefan Wolff, “Options for dealing with Russia in the OSCE”, *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, (11 May 2022). <https://www.shrmonitor.org/options-for-dealing-with-russia-in-the-osce/>

<sup>8</sup> Weitz, Richard. “The Rise and Fall of Medvedev’s European Security Treaty.” *German Marshall Fund of the United States*, (2012). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep18640>

<sup>9</sup> OSCE Office in Baku / OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Baku (closed). <https://www.osce.org/baku-closed>

<sup>10</sup> Philipp Lottholz, “Post-Liberal Statebuilding in Central Asia: Imaginaries, Discourses and Practices of Social Ordering”, *Bristol University Press*, (2022).

of different perceptions of security. This led to the rise of intra-state security<sup>11</sup> becoming a legitimate concern of the OSCE. Despite significant institutional progress in this regard, the OSCE is limited in its tools to intervene in intra-state affairs, not the least because it is a consensus-based organization.

An alternative approach underscores the inter-State dimensions of OSCE security. Sanctity of internal affairs and, more recently, rhetoric on not enhancing security at the expense of other participating States, is prioritized. Though supported by others, Russia has been a vocal proponent of this approach.

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With the new security environment emerging and in light of these historical divergences in security hierarchies, it is important to assess if the OSCE model of ‘European’ security is still valid horizontally from Vladivostok to Vancouver and vertically from leaders to grassroots actors across the region. This is not to say the institution’s membership should be curtailed, but rather that there should be no false premises about the OSCE region sharing and conforming to the same vision of security.

As focus shifts to if and how to sustain the OSCE past 2022, the perspective of civil society on the ground may help revive a truly comprehensive version of the OSCE. To the promoters and believers of comprehensive, human-centered security, it should be essential to ask about perceptions of security among the more than one billion inhabitants of the OSCE area.

### ***Vertical Approach - Views from the Ground***

As part of a small research project looking at hopes and aspirations for the OSCE in 2025, we conducted interviews with civil society representatives and experts who have worked with or are familiar with OSCE activities in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These were complemented by anonymous background discussions

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Evers, Martin Kahl and Wolfgang Zellner, “The Culture of Dialogue: The OSCE Acquis 30 Years after Helsinki,” *Centre for OSCE Research | Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH)*, (2005). <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/4/16108.pdf>

with diplomats. The preliminary findings from interviews suggest that a view of the OSCE from civil-society representatives' perspectives differed from that of Western capitals'. The discussions also indicate a discrepancy between the comprehensive security approach promoted on paper and that in practice.

The initial observation was that the comprehensive approach to security for local actors in these regions is not always recognized as being fully 'comprehensive'. The organization is associated chiefly with elections, and particularly with the ODIHR-executed elections observation.

As a rule, OSCE support for human rights is seen as indispensable, but some were concerned that the OSCE would simply become a second and weak Council of Europe. The message, in short, was that human rights, fair elections, and development are what people want and need, but these projects are not always associated with 'security'. In the words of one Central Asian interviewee, security evokes images of elite perceptions, such as 'regime stability', and according to another, security is associated with male-dominated power structures such as police and armed forces.

Secondly, the baggage of the OSCE as the host of unsuccessful conflict settlement mechanisms was felt, especially in the South Caucasus. The perceived inability of the OSCE to resolve conflicts in the region strains and limits expectations. One interviewee in the Caucasus reminded us that in the former Soviet space, there is limited memory of what the CSCE accomplished during the Cold War. At the same time, interviewees recount a history of the CSCE as fostering dialogue during the Cold War, recognizing that there is a need for such an actor once again. In the words of one expert, 'when Europe is sick and in need of a doctor, that is the role which the OSCE should play.'

There was a more even-keeled approach toward the Russian renewed use of force in Ukraine. While there was a general aversion to the use of force in the War in Ukraine, the Russian invasion was not opposed as vehemently as it was in Europe. This is telling and a helpful starting point for a revived OSCE. Western leaders should reflect that their certainty may only be regional and not universal.

### *Horizontal Approach – Compulsory Geopolitics*

This growing conceptual divide over what the OSCE should stand for – high politics or grassroots implementation – has led to continued Russian protests, resulting in the eroded functionality of the OSCE over more than a decade.

To take an example, Europe's largest annual human rights conference, the Human

Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM),<sup>12</sup> has not been held in two years. Yet Moscow's most blatant action has come in the last months. This includes blocking the extension<sup>13</sup> of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) mandate and neglecting the detainment of OSCE SMM national staff<sup>14</sup> members in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. There is now concern that the OSCE budget for 2022 will remain without consensus,<sup>15</sup> beginning the financial asphyxiation of OSCE institutional functionality.

For authoritarian leaders in the region, further degradation of the OSCE as a liberal organization for human rights and democracy in the post-Soviet space may be convenient. However, losing the OSCE altogether at the current moment would be more detrimental for Moscow than for the West. This is becoming starkly apparent, especially as smaller states such as Finland, which has historically sustained the OSCE as a forum to de-escalate conflict, are now planning to join NATO.

The irony of the situation, according to Mark Galeotti, is that Moscow was in a stronger negotiating position to discuss European security issues prior to their renewed use of force in Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> Western leaders are now in a more assertive posture to retain the status-quo, at least in Europe.

Adding to the irony, Moscow previously refused to use the OSCE as a forum for negotiating European security and demanded direct negotiations with Washington and NATO. This too looks like a potential lapse in Russian diplomacy as NATO or Washington will be the primary negotiating partner, but again, in a strengthened posture due to the pending addition of Finland and Sweden.'

Despite Western interests in creating the post-Cold War OSCE as a bastion for indivisible and human-rights-based security, time and effort still go towards debating Russia on its geopolitical concerns. This may further limit opportunities for Vienna to incorporate civil society voices and make comprehensive security a truly societal endeavor rather than just an elite project.

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<sup>12</sup> OSCE <https://www.osce.org/odihr/hdim>

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Liechtenstein, "Russia blocks mandate extension of OSCE monitoring mission to Ukraine", *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, (31 March 2022). <https://www.shrmonitor.org/russia-blocks-mandate-extension-of-osce-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/>

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Liechtenstein, "Four national OSCE mission members detained in eastern Ukraine", *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, (23 April 2022). <https://www.shrmonitor.org/four-national-osce-mission-members-detained-in-eastern-ukraine/>

<sup>15</sup> Friesendorf and Wolff, (2022).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Galeotti, remarks at the meeting "The Struggles of the Russian Military in Ukraine", *Council on Foreign Affairs*, (14 April 2022). <https://www.cfr.org/event/struggles-russian-military-ukraine>

### *Whose Security for 2025*

Experts and decision-makers once again parley over the evergreen question of the OSCE's relevance. The discussion has vacillated from discussing seemingly inoperative principles of European security as a primary function for keeping channels of dialogue open to if the OSCE should remain as an institution to implement specific understandings of those principles.

Arie Bloed argued that “the day will come when security and cooperation in Europe will have to be rebuilt. And when that day comes, the OSCE should be ready – and it should be used.”<sup>17</sup> The struggle now for states such as Finland who want to promote a human-centered approach to security in parallel to promoting their political-military security, is how to do so while also maintaining the functionality of the OSCE.

Exploring the needs, desires, and hopes among the populations in the OSCE region, rather than only conforming to the visions of elites in a more systematic and meaningful manner could provide ideas on how to steer the OSCE towards a new era. Focusing on security perceptions on the ground rather than what Western capitals define as security perceptions for the region may help make the OSCE more inclusive East of Vienna.

Attempts should be made to do so to promote the OSCE as a doctor that can assess the ailments of European security rather than a judge that passes down verdicts from Western capitals. Making these discussions about ‘security’ broader and not specifically on human rights (though incorporating first dimension issues) may offer more amicable perspectives.

Conducting these discussions in the region rather than in continental Europe may also change the conversation dynamic by bringing a security dialogue closer to the people. By framing the debate on perceptions of human security, rather than pre-defining subsets such as gender, human rights, freedom of media, etc., it might also create a less hostile environment for certain government officials who sometimes take a defensive footing at HDIM meetings. This may be a via media to promote intra-state security and evoke the memories of the CSCE's Cold War added value that may have more traction in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

This proposition would shift away from compartmentalized security and open discussion for different perceptions or how to combine alternative perceptions of

<sup>17</sup> Arie Bloed, “Suspend Russia from the OSCE? Think twice”, *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, (1 March 2022). <https://www.shrmonitor.org/suspend-russia-from-the-osce-think-twice/>

security. If Western elites take a few steps back from promoting human rights, the process of human security might become more human and democratic than if it continues to be imposed.

The OSCE may be going through an existential crisis with the Russian reinvasion of Ukraine. This, however, might be an opportunity to reassess perceptions of security across the OSCE region and refocus on the people that the OSCE claims to provide security for rather than the elite projects that are fought over in Vienna. Daring to change might be needed to break the mold of conflict that mutual actions have fashioned for the 21st century.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Acknowledgments - We would like to thank our research participants for their candor and expertise.