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RETHINKING EUROPEAN SECURITY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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What the OSCE's loss of legitimacy tells us about the state of norm-based European security

Europe is once again divided. Although the fault lines between East and West now extend further east, they are causing tensions that are shaking European societies to their core and, in some cases, leading to extreme internal polarisation. Rearmament, deterrence and border closures are back on the agenda rather than cooperation and dialogue. The consequences may be dire, particularly for societal and human security, but also for evolving security needs and local and regional expectations. Furthermore, the crisis of European security goes hand in hand with a crisis of multilateralism and the dominance of military over diplomatic solutions.

the situation of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), founded as a multilateral forum to promote cooperative security and norm-based cooperation among European states and societies, reflects the weakness of traditional multilateral institutions. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the US withdrawal from international forums and commitments have put considerable pressure on the OSCE's founding principles of multilateral action, particularly with regard to cooperative security and democratic institutions. The "co-operative security" approach frames security relations between states in terms of standing with each other rather than against each other. Since 2022 at the latest, it has become apparent that realising this ideal is no longer practically feasible. Global power shifts and some states' increasing autocratisation are also reflected within the OSCE (only two-thirds of OSCE's participating states are currently classified as democratic).[1]

The OSCE has been suffering a crisis of legitimacy since 2022. It has become marginalised in discourses on European security, including the current discussions on potential security guarantees for Ukraine. The contrast between the OSCE's broad, inclusive foundation of participating states and the narrow and increasingly fragile understanding of common interests and normative convictions ("liberal overstretch") has magnified the parlous state of norm-based European security.[2]

1 https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/html/global-state-democracy-2025-democracy-move

2 Cf. Christian et al. (2023).

The OSCE's core competences in conflict management and resolution have been called into question. Indeed, since the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas in 2014, the OSCE has been unable to broker a negotiated solution between Russia and Ukraine. The OSCE-mandated Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM), which was tasked with overseeing the ceasefire agreement, was also unable to prevent the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Despite high-level mediation in the context of the Normandy format, the agreement negotiated and signed by the Trilateral Contact Group (the Minsk Protocols) suffered from many shortcomings, one of which was certainly its inadequately planned implementation. While the OSCE can facilitate dialogue between conflicting parties, it is powerless when two of its member states are at war and one of them shows no political will to find a solution. There is some truth in the dictum that the OSCE can only be as strong as its participating states allow it to be. Ultimately, it is not an autonomous entity and can act only on the basis of unanimous decisions by the Permanent Council, its central decision-making body, which is composed of all 57 participating states. The reason it did not meet its own objectives, as in the case of the SMM, was not its deficient capabilities and instruments, but rather the inadequate mandate given to it by the participating states. Therefore, it is misguided to speak broadly of the Organization's failure and to propose a new, overarching security structure for Europe that includes the same participating European states (see for example, Budraitskis/Yudin, 2024[3]). Any new structure would be affected by the same divisions and structural disagreements in Europe regarding normative convictions and interests.

Based on the results of an ongoing SWP research project[4] on the transformation of norms and legitimacy among OSCE participating states, this contribution focuses first on the reporting system within the politico-military dimension as an indicator of participating states' adherence to norm-based behaviour, their jointly agreed self-commitments, and ultimately, the multilateral security structure in Europe. The paper then explores ways in which the OSCE can regain legitimacy and remain relevant in matters of European security. First, it will need to refocus on its regional strengths. Second, it must pay more attention to civil society as a driver of security "from below".

3 Budraitskis, Ilya and Yudin, Greg (2024): Overcoming the Rivalry Between Military Blocs in Europe, IGRec Policy Papers. Available at: https://www.igrec.io/articles/overcoming-the-rivalry-between-military-blocs-in-europe

4 The project is funded by the German Federal Foreign Office. As part of the sub-project on changing norms and legitimacy within the OSCE, expert interviews have been conducted with military advisers from permanent missions and national ministries of the participating states, staff from the OSCE Secretariat, and independent experts. These were supplemented by an AI-assisted evaluation of OSCE documents and published national questionnaires within the framework of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security. The author thanks Celina Thadewaldt and Simon Muschick for their research assistance and data compilation.

Evolving normative standards at the expense of multilateral principles

The OSCE system was not designed to cope with a situation in which participating states are at war with one another. Consequently, none of the agreed rules and regulations in the first dimension (notably in the areas of arms control and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBM)) were intended to prevent a war of aggression. For over three decades, the OSCE has therefore been an international actor closely associated with conventional disarmament and arms control. But it is primarily its activities in the third dimension that come to public attention. The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), based in Warsaw, has become particularly well known through its election observation missions conducted "East of Vienna".

After the full-scale invasion began, Ukraine declared that it would no longer comply with its reporting obligations. As a result, other OSCE participating states also ceased to exchange information with Russia and Belarus, as co-aggressor, via the internal communications network. Russia itself had suspended reciprocal inspections for the verification and review of military facilities and units under the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures (VD) one month earlier, officially citing the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. From then on, inspections, verification visits and monitoring of military activities beyond the relevant threshold – among other things – could no longer be carried out.

Since February 2022, day-to-day political practice, and thus also the reporting system in the politico-military dimension, has not been "business as usual". This results from the exceptional situation with regard to consensus-based voting and associated methodological and thematic restrictions. Under the "adapted implementation" approach, states are no longer making all possible information available to all others. As a result, the community of participating states can now be divided into three groups: the vast majority, which still adhere to the applicable regimes and implements them reliably; those states (around six on NATO's eastern border with Russia) that still formally implement the regimes but are no longer willing to share substantial security-sensitive information with certain states; and the third group of less well represented participating states, which tend to be rather passive on implementation issues and exchange information in a partially incomplete or selective manner, or not at all. The cancellation of many face-to-face meetings and thematic sessions because of the deadlock in the organisation has meant that arms control and CSBM are now taking place almost exclusively at the technical-military level.

The year 2022 is seen as a turning point in the way participating states interact. (Military) information exchange is increasingly being used to signal political messages. However, this has had less impact on the concrete implementation of voluntary commitments and technical reporting obligations, even if there have been instances of non-compliance. The value of multilateral procedures in the politico-military sphere remains undisputed at the level of national military advisers and arms

control inspectors. At this level, there is also still a stronger consensus, based on a common military identity, on the need for continued implementation and the future relevance of these agreements. At the political level, this is far less clear-cut, as these regimes are often regarded as "fair-weather instruments" and not adequate during times of conflict or relics of a bygone era.[5] In fact, there has been a noticeable decoupling of the political from the military-technical level and the relevant knowledge, best practices and recommendations.

States' normative principles have been in transition. The annual, publicly accessible exchange of information within the framework of the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (CoC) illustrates this particularly clearly. The core of the CoC is dialogue on domestic elements of security (especially on the democratic control of security organs). The evaluation of annual questionnaires submitted by the participating states sheds light on slow but steady changes in the area of national military planning and decision-making processes. This change is partly accompanied by security policy transformation processes and paradigmatic shifts.

For many years, the responses of the German government were characterised predominantly by constitutionally justified explanations, supplemented by constitutional case law (such as the 1994 Federal Constitutional Court ruling on the legal framework for the admissibility of foreign military deployments). From 2018 onwards, however, a significantly more political line of argumentation can be observed, with a strong commitment to financial and alliance policy obligations. From 2022/23 onwards, however, its statements clearly reflected the federal government's "Zeitenwende" policy at the time, with more strategic and political language and an explicit return to an "interest-based, value-led security policy". Similarly, in Austria, the clear commitment to the defence constitution (Wehrverfassung) was gradually supplemented by references to the Austrian security strategy and the National Security Council, which from 2014 onwards increasingly functioned as a central hinge. In France, too, in addition to the president, the National Defence and Security Council and the multi-year framework for the defence budget have gained in importance since 2014 at the latest and are more closely linked to strategic planning and review processes. In Belarus and Russia, greater emphasis has been placed on "efficiency" and "further development" of state and military organisation from 2014 onwards. But here, too, more strategic-doctrinal elements have been added since 2014. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and its associated open disregard for the principles of the CoC (including violations of fundamental norms of international humanitarian law in the occupied territories of Ukraine) have, depending on one's perspective, either put its validity to the test or further enhanced the Code's importance.

As far as democratic control is concerned, the only possible interpretation of the information provided by Russia (which has not submitted any responses since 2024) and Belarus is that it is detached from reality. The information provided by the other selected states makes it clear that institutionalised coordination bodies such as national security councils and multi-year financial

5 Schaller 2021.

frameworks do increase efficiency and strategic planning, but at the expense of transparency (for example, meetings may be partly classified) and thus also democratic control (lack of accountability to parliaments) in terms of the CoC. In the long run this also results in the weakening of multilateral agreements within the OSCE.

Regional conflict prevention

Security often functions from the bottom up. The OSCE is a regional organisation, whose strengths lie primarily in being rooted at the regional/local level. Over the years, however, it has developed into quite an unwieldly system. It has relevant expertise, experience and capacities, but difficulties unleashing this potential.

Nonetheless, the OSCE continues to do important work behind the scenes, as it has competence and expertise at all stages of the "conflict cycle" (early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management and post-conflict rehabilitation).[6] Conflict prevention is considered an OSCE strength, but it is not very visible. Because it does not produce success stories, it lacks recognition. In retrospect, it is naturally impossible to prove whether a conflict would have flared up again if the OSCE had not been present on the ground. While military conflict prevention (deterrence) is now the dominant approach in dealing with Russia and the war in Ukraine, comparatively little is being done for civilian conflict prevention in the OSCE area. However, studies show that the international community could save enormous sums of money if it focused its efforts more specifically on preventing violence in conflicts rather than on subsequent military interventions to end them.[7]

In the shadow of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, it is hardly noticed that the OSCE's politico-military dimension and the organisation as a whole have broader scope of application. CSBM measures as part of the Vienna Document continue to be useful, for example in states with border conflicts (for example, in Central Asia and the South Caucasus) that could benefit from reversion to the crisis consultation mechanism under Chapter 3 of the VD before sending troops and responding militarily. Thus, at the regional level, arms control and CSBM measures (inspections, verification visits and joint inspection exercises) continue to take place every week within the framework of the VD, but these remain below the threshold of public awareness. The verification and control part of implementation of the Dayton Agreement between the four Western Balkan states of Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) is also proceeding under the radar. Within this framework, a sub-regional arms control regime (Dayton Agreement, Article IV, Annex 1B, known as the Florence

6 https://www.osce.org/conflict-prevention-and-resolution

7 Cf. Mueller (2017).

Agreement), comparable to the CFE Treaty, has existed between the participating states since 1996. To this day it remains central to maintaining security and stability in the region. After many years of OSCE monitoring, the four participating states took over responsibility for implementing the agreement and now regulate it themselves with a rotating chairpersonship among the four parties.

Overall, the OSCE should be seen as a platform for implementing and fine-tuning overarching political outcomes. The OSCE acted quickly in 2014, under the Swiss chair, launching the SMM literally within days. In 2026, the Swiss will hold the chair once again and as they underlined at the 32nd OSCE Ministerial Council in December, could be ready to act instantly once a political outcome between Russia and Ukraine was reached and a mandate given to the OSCE. The organisation has numerous tried and tested instruments, methods and expertise, for example in guarding demilitarised zones. Humanitarian mine clearance, the handling of stockpiles of conventional ammunition, and the control of small arms and light weapons are also important prerequisites for the normalisation of post-war societies. Moreover, the OSCE has decades of experience from its work in Southeast Europe in matters of delimitation/demarcation. The SMM in Ukraine, in any case, was not entirely unsuccessful at the time, as it mediated so-called "windows of silence", which were used, for example, to repair critical infrastructure, thereby making life more bearable for millions of people in Ukraine on both sides of the contact line. The lack of a sanction mechanism for violations of the agreements was a problem, however. Nevertheless, the OSCE's relationships with both Russia and Ukraine are difficult; they just do not trust it anymore, albeit for different reasons. Ukraine's specific experience with the Minsk process and the Trilateral Contact Group has led to widespread scepticism toward the OSCE today. Russia in turn now views the OSCE as an instrument of the "collective West", and one that from its perspective has become inefficient when it comes to finding solutions to security-related questions.

Civil society as compensatory and accountability mechanism

Because OSCE decisions are generally not legally binding, since 1975 it has been down to civil society to render states accountable by virtue of their commitments. But pressure on civil societies is growing. Their scope for action and the space for dissent and criticism are increasingly narrowing.[8] Across Europe, funding for non-state actors is becoming more difficult as public budgets tighten. Governments and international institutions, on the other hand, underestimate the power and relevance of the tasks that civil society entities are capable of performing, including in security-related areas.

8 Pardavi and Knoll-Tudor (2022).

In the OSCE context, there are several categories of organisation that continue to play an important role and could potentially do so in the future: First, actors at the local level who are deeply rooted in their respective societies and assist or lobby for certain (minority) groups. Second, international humanitarian organisations that act in an advisory capacity but are also entrusted with implementation tasks (for example in the areas of civil protection, reconstruction or mine clearance). Finally, civil and human rights associations that carry forward the legacy of the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and the Paris Charter of the 1990s. They are committed to transnational advocacy work in the OSCE area in order to promote the preservation and implementation of the Helsinki Principles. Despite the fact that civil society entities, in particular NGOs, are not democratically elected, and illiberal civil society actors are on the rise – one might mention GONGOs in authoritarian contexts but also as back-up for populist forces in liberal democracies – the majority of organisations derive their mandate from their commitment, self-imposed obligations and the important functions they perform. Another SWP research project has shown that civil society organisations are still not recognised sufficiently, especially in relation to conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation.[9] This is more crucial today, particularly as the active war/conflict phase is increasingly merging with the post-conflict rehabilitation phase. The war in Ukraine shows how crucial the work of civil society organisations can be today, not only in the traditional sense of promoting peace, but also as a compensatory force in areas in which the state's ability to act is limited.[10] Under wartime conditions, civil society activities aimed at building civil defence and resilience are essential. The military also relies on the help of civil society. Civil society organisations, for example, take on tasks such as evacuating civilians, providing training courses on international humanitarian law, investigating and, above all, documenting war crimes and crimes against humanity, repatriating prisoners of war and abductees, and rehabilitating veterans.[11] Their great advantage is that they can often adapt more effectively than state agencies to the rapidly changing dynamics of war.

In the case of political deadlocks during negotiations, civil society actors can often make concrete proposals for improving the living conditions of people on the ground. However, the OSCE's precarious situation in recent years has led to a decline in interest in cooperation among civil society organisations. In fact, only a small circle of organisations work closely with the OSCE on a permanent basis. In addition, the OSCE is not a traditional donor organisation and project financing must usually be provided by other sources or in the form of extra-budgetary projects funded by participating states. In fact, national and international development cooperation projects offer good examples of what more systematic cooperation with civil society can look like.

9 Douglas (2025).

10 Stepanenko and Stewart (2025).

11 Cf. Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS), Ukrainian Civil Society under the War, Kyiv, December 2022–January 2023. Available at: https://ednannia.ua/attachments/article/12447/Ukrainian%20civil%20society% 20under%20the%20war.pdf; Oksana Mikheieva/Irina Kuznetsova, War-time volunteering and population displacement: from spontaneous help to organised volunteering in post-2014 Ukraine, in: Voluntary Sector Review, 15(1), 2024, 74-91.

Outlook: preservation and adaptation

In terms of its core functions, over the years the OSCE has remained relevant to a more general public primarily as a forum for political dialogue between Russia and the West. However, there have been few breakthroughs within this framework. Several attempts since the 1990s to establish a new system of cooperative security have been unsuccessful. There will be no return to the status quo ante in terms of European security policy. We are back in a situation of radical Realpolitik, zero sum games and a prevailing military logic. There is not much to be done to reverse the current rearmament trend. Nevertheless, states will eventually have to balance their budgets again and find ways to control and limit arms in Europe. The OSCE is one of the few frameworks within which certain self-commitments by participating states in terms of CSBMs and military transparency still function at a rudimentary level.

This continuous implementation at the technical and military levels shows that a consensus still exists on the future relevance of these agreements. At the political level, however, this stance is far less clear-cut. Criticism of the regimes, which is often based on ignorance, obscures their actual purpose and ignores their potential benefits. On the other hand, there is a widespread understanding that the first-dimension regimes are in dire need of reform. New technologies, especially in the fields of drones and AI, must be taken into account. Nevertheless, inertia prevails in the organisation's blocked and politicised decision-making bodies. Nevertheless, the remaining mechanisms and regimes must be preserved by all means. Failure to recognise the need to maintain capabilities, capacities and technical expertise in these areas may have serious consequences.

Moreover, in order to regain legitimacy and remain relevant in matters of European security, the OSCE must adapt to the challenges posed by an evolving multilateral order.

While multilateral forums are just one of many instruments available to larger states, they provide an essential safety net for smaller states by offering them the opportunity to pursue joint policies that counterbalance those of more influential and powerful states. For states that are neither integrated into Western alliances nor oriented towards Russia in terms of security policy, the OSCE remains an important forum for transnational exchange on security issues. At the regional level, there is still potential for the implementation of relevant first dimension regimes, as demonstrated by the regime in the Western Balkans, which has evolved as part of the Dayton Agreement until today.

As an implementing body for negotiated solutions to conflicts, including in the area of post-conflict rehabilitation, the OSCE continues to have a comprehensive toolkit at its disposal. The key to this lies in regional agreements that establish dispute resolution, reintegration, confidence-building and early warning mechanisms between a small number of states. This creates a balance of interests that would no longer be possible at the level of all participating states.

In order to better adapt institutionally and in terms of its programmatic orientation the OSCE would need to reposition itself as a complementary actor to other international organisations or coalitions, focusing on relevant fields such as civil defence and protection, disaster management and resilience-building. It could notably bring together civil society actors from crisis-ridden regions with those that have just begun to build expertise in these areas.

Multilateral forums such as the OSCE thus remain a vital platform and cooperation partners for civil society. When discussing and negotiating European security, ruling elites must be reminded that security essentially is a roots-based concept. Civil society actors provide a voice for those who are not represented or heard in political deliberations, compensate for state deficiencies and hold decision-makers accountable. This becomes more and more relevant in a world in which states are increasingly shifting away from the rules-based international order. In short, civil society actors and their watchdog function are crucial if we are to develop a European security perspective that considers not only the interests of policymakers, but also the perceptions, needs and demands of the people most affected by situations of insecurity. The CSCE/OSCE was founded to provide security not only for states but also the societies and people of Europe.

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