FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 03.07.2023 | Cornelius Friesendorf

The OSCE's midlife crisis

50 years after its foundation, the OSCE has remained a club of non-like-minded states. But as autocracies rise, the organisation might lose relevance

The OSCE would, one might think, have reason to celebrate. After all, 50 years ago, on 3 July 1973, negotiations began in the framework of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Its successor, the OSCE, allows its 57 participating states to hold weekly negotiations in the Vienna Hofburg on topics as diverse as arms control, conflict management, economic cooperation and human rights.

But there is no sign of a celebratory mood in the OSCE, rather the opposite: since 24 February 2022, stress and depression have increased significantly. Key political decisions in the OSCE require the consent of all 57 governments. But with this consensus regulation being blocked, primarily by Russia, the organisation's ability to act is severely limited.

Ensuring the OSCE's survival

The critical budgetary situation in particular is a constant source of concern. Inflation is depleting resources and no annual budget has been passed since 2021. Instead, only monthly emergency budgets remain — not the planning security customary for an international organisation. Nor is there agreement on which state should chair the OSCE in 2024 or on pending personnel decisions concerning the management of the Secretariat and the three human rights institutions.

Since 24 February 2022, however, Western democracies have acted innovatively to enable the OSCE to survive, circumventing the consensus principle with voluntary financial contributions. After Russia's veto forced the OSCE to shut down field operations in Ukraine in 2022, there is now a new support program for Ukraine. Austria has declared itself ready to assume the OSCE chairmanship in 2024 if necessary.

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regional organisation in which representatives from, among others, the US, Russia and Ukraine, still meet regularly. The OSCE would thus be the logical place for negotiations on peace in Ukraine. The organisation has also set global standards, for example in the protection of minorities and election observation.

In addition to emergency state aid, the persistence of the OSCE apparatus makes it unlikely that the organisation will disappear. For example, local OSCE field operations staff know and respect the invisible red lines that authoritarian participating states place on field operations in OSCE projects.

What further helps the OSCE is that authoritarian states also view it as useful. Central Asia, wedged between Russia and China, is keen to deepen ties with Europe. Another advantage: in contrast to NATO, the EU and the Council of Europe, Russia's current foreign policy doctrine does not see the OSCE as an adversary.

How to deal with autocracies within the OSCE?

However, in order for the OSCE to become more relevant again, democracies need a strategy for dealing with authoritarian states within the organisation. Ultimately, autocracies in particular weaken the OSCE, even though democracies also often neglect it – and have problems with their own authoritarian-populist tendencies. In particular, autocrats see the human rights enshrined in the OSCE's human dimension, such as free elections, freedom of assembly and free media, as a threat to their power.

A democratisation of the OSCE area as in the 1990s, when the establishment of liberal institutions was possible, is unlikely in the medium term. States like Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are among the most repressive in the world, along with Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan, and even Serbia is considered only a partially free country.

A strategy against autocracy is unfortunately even more complicated in the OSCE than at the global level. The OSCE has always been a club of non-like-minded states, and any attempt to form an anti-autocracy alliance within the OSCE would break up the organisation. In addition, Germany and other Western democracies are seeking closer cooperation with states like Kazakhstan to isolate Russia.

A strategy against autocracies within the OSCE needs many building blocks. Firstly, democracies have to identify issues that are cross-border in nature and can therefore only be solved jointly, but are also of interest to autocrats. Limiting the security consequences of climate change is a prime candidate here.

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Second, democracies should be open to cooperation with Russia in this regard. Of course, it is difficult to work with a revisionist Russia, in contrast to the Soviet Union, which was keen to cement the status quo with the help of the CSCE. Whether the OSCE can again lead a civilian peacekeeping operation in Ukraine or serve as a forum for negotiations on conventional arms control depends on whether Russia becomes 'only' autocratic and no longer imperialist. But even a revisionist Russia should be interested in preventing undesired military escalation. In this way, the exchange of military information could once again become a security-building measure in the OSCE.

Third, democracies should ensure that the OSCE gets involved in issues where other (financially stronger) international organisations do not already dominate, or at least call for greater coordination. For example, OSCE border protection programmes in Central Asia run parallel to EU and United Nations programs.

Fourth: to be able to protect OSCE human rights commitments, democracies must be credible. When democracies dismantle fundamental rights, they fuel autocratic propaganda that is happy to speak of double standards. When working with autocracies, democracies should put the consequences for local populations first and not their own security interests. For example, police cooperation with Central Asia carries the risk of unintentionally strengthening repressive security forces. Being credible also means that democracies control *each other*. The practice, particularly by EU members, of excluding one another from criticism within the OSCE is problematic here.

The crisis of liberalism weakens the OSCE – an inclusive security organisation based on liberal principles – from within. To this we must add external challenges, in particular China's growing influence in the OSCE area. Democrats in the OSCE need to find the right level of cooperation and controversy for the OSCE to regain vitality. Such a strategy would be more important than 50th anniversary celebrations at

which symbolisms such as group photos with autocrats obscure the OSCE's broken foundations.



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