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We have an institution to ensure peace in Europe

The OSCE is stifled by a lack of resources and political will. That's a shame — it could play a decisive role in de-escalating the current crisis

In the ongoing and further intensifying Ukraine crisis, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is one of many communication channels where de-escalation is being pursued. German politicians in particular regularly bring up its potential role in easing tensions. Indeed, on her two recent visits to Kyiv, Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock also met with German experts of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine to express the federal government's appreciation for their important work.

At the same time, Russia's permanent representative to the OSCE, Alexander Lukashevich, announced that his country had no intentions to discuss its security initiatives under the OSCE umbrella. According to Moscow, the Organization is characterised by 'amorphous structures' and, without a legal international status, lacks relevance. The newly launched OSCE high-level dialogue on European security, he stressed, was 'ill-conceived'. So what is the state of the world's largest regional security organisation as it approaches the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2025?

The Organization's legally shaky foundations have direct consequences for its work.

The comments from Moscow might at first look like an affront, but they are technically accurate. The OSCE does not have a founding charter under international law. Despite its renaming from a conference (CSCE) to an organisation (OSCE) at the Budapest Summit in 1994, it remains a political dialogue forum with quasi-permanent structures. That's why the 57 countries from Vancouver to Vladivostok that form the OSCE are referred to as 'participating states', not member states.

This is more than just a legal nuance. The Organization's legally shaky foundations have direct consequences for its work. The status, immunity, and privileges of its offices and employees must be agreed bilaterally with each country. Decisions taken in the OSCE are not legally binding. Therefore, the OSCE ultimately lacks international legal authority, particularly in relation to other international organisations.

The OSCE's political authority

Against this backdrop, the OSCE's political authority is all the more important. It is the sole security policy forum that brings together all European countries, post-Soviet states, the United States, Canada, and Mongolia. Every week, Russia and NATO countries convene around the same table at the conference centre in the Vienna Hofburg.

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Because of the OSCE's deep internal divisions and the prevailing consensus rule, however, far-reaching decisions are rather the exception. When they do happen, OSCE decisions carry considerable normative weight – as with the establishment of the OSCE monitoring mission at the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

Sadly, such diplomatic success stories are rare. The OSCE is mired in permanent crisis, verging on paralysis. The Swedish chairmanship in 2021 ended with few substantive achievements. The OSCE-hosted Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Europe's largest human rights conference, was blocked by Russia. Election monitoring missions are regularly disputed. Agreements are reached only with great difficulty, if at all, even on largely operational matters, such as the annual budget or the agenda for the annual security conference. In 2020, the Organization stared into the abyss when, in an unprecedented leadership crisis, its four most important posts lay vacant for several months, including that of secretary general.

What is the OSCE?

All these challenges stem from fundamental differences concerning the OSCE's core purpose. Western states emphasise the Organization's uniquely comprehensive approach to security, encompassing political-military, economic, environmental, and human rights issues, which emerged from Helsinki. A number of eastern participating countries have strong reservations about its human rights agenda.

If the OSCE were to be founded today, it is almost inconceivable that an agreement could be reached on its very principles, including the Paris Charter for Europe's post-Cold War order. Over the years, there have been more than one attempt to bring about meaningful reforms, but to little avail. It seems unlikely that future OSCE chairs will have more success: Poland this year, followed by North Macedonia, Estonia (to be confirmed) and Finland.

The price of peace

Many actors bear responsibility for the OSCE's sorry state. Moscow, for example, has repeatedly weakened OSCE mandates and operational capabilities, while at the same time lamenting the Organization's lacking relevance. Countries like Armenia and Azerbaijan often obstruct even the simplest decisions on procedural matters, following a logic of national rivalry. Various host countries have limited the mandates of OSCE field operations, although it needs to be recognised that this is their sovereign right. Western countries, too, have sold the OSCE short, preferring other organisations or bilateral formats. Moreover, many states continue to prioritise austerity policies and fail to give the Organization the financial resources it needs.

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At the same time, there is rarely any other organisation in the world that offers security at a more reasonable price. Its regular annual budget of around €138 million is modest by international standards. The Ukraine observation mission has a separate budget of around €100 million. In 2020, the OSCE had more than 3,500 staff from 51 countries in 20 locations. Its achievements are considerable, as the Ukraine conflict highlights.

A key role in Ukraine

The presence of unarmed international observers along the contact line in Eastern Ukraine has made a significant difference, albeit often far away from public awareness. Local Ukrainians have worked side by side with Americans, Russians, and Europeans. According to a report by the observers, between July 2019 and October 2021 the OSCE mediated more than 3,000 local ceasefires. Repair works on critical water and electricity infrastructure have given millions of civilians access to fundamental services.

In publicly available daily reports, the OSCE documents compliance

(and any non-compliance) with the 2015 Minsk Protocol and is an indispensable neutral voice on the ground. With this in mind, it is greatly worrying that some participating states have decided to pull out their observers fearing further escalation.

There are a number of reasons why the OSCE's important work does not receive broader attention. For one thing, its observers are often subjected to obstructions. They are denied access to the relevant regions and sites, their freedom of movement is restricted, and OSCE unmanned aerial drones are interfered with or shot down. The Organization registered a total of 93,902 ceasefire violations in 2021, which exceeds its capacity to broker ceasefires many times. Moreover, given the current geopolitical dynamics and fast-paced high-level diplomacy on the world stage, the often cumbersome de-escalation work in the very conflict zone tends to get less attention.

A future platform for European security

In light of all this, what role can the OSCE play in pursuit of a future European security order? As in any organisation, this ultimately comes down to the political will of the participating states. A number of OSCE key actors currently exhibit a lack of such will. As things stand, the most obvious approach – namely not to re-invent the wheel but to dust off the organisation and reinvigorate it – is therefore hardly an option.

In the long run, however, we will need a joint platform for European security.

The crisis of the OSCE is not of operational or technical nature, but deeply political. Needless to say that this is profoundly regrettable, given its unique wealth of experience in early warning and conflict prevention, as well as crisis management and resolution, and its tried-and-tested toolbox of confidence-building measures – among them the mechanism about 'unusual military activities' under the OSCE Vienna Document Ukraine is using to seek clarification from Russia.

In the current crisis and with tensions reaching new heights, all channels of communication are useful and important, whether it be direct talks between Russia and the United States, the NATO-Russia Council, the Normandy Format, shuttle diplomacy or the many discrete talks behind the scenes. Whatever works to help avoid further escalation is to be welcomed.

In the long run, however, we will need a joint platform for European

security. For Germany in particular, collective defence as part of NATO, on one hand, and cooperative security for the whole of Europe, on the other, are not mutually exclusive. The continent needs a pan-European security order, even though – at present – this goal appears very distant.



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