

Summary: OSCE Focus Conference 2023

On 20-21 October 2023, the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) held the latest addition of its OSCE Focus Conference. Attendees included several Ambassadors to the OSCE, OSCE representatives (including from the Secretary General's office), former practitioners with years of experience working in OSCE affairs, and a varied group of experts on European and Euro-Atlantic security issues. The following reflects some of the main points articulated during each of the sessions.

Session 1: The Ukraine war's impact on the OSCE

The OSCE is facing a serious crisis as a result of the war in Ukraine. There is little dialogue, it is difficult to take decisions (by consensus), and there is no agreement on a budget or which country will chair the Organization in 2024. This begged the question: Given Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the broader state of Russia-West relations, is there still a need for an organization focused on cooperative security? While in the past, even as part of NATO doctrine, deterrence and détente were two pillars of European defence, today there is almost no talk of détente – on either side. It was widely acknowledged that while the current situation makes it difficult for the OSCE to do much more than muddle through, a minimal goal should be to keep the organization alive since it may be uniquely placed to help rebuild European security in the post-war period.

It was noted that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not the only reason why the OSCE is in crisis. Even prior to Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and occupation of much of the Donbas region, the OSCE already exhibited challenges, yet reforms were resisted. If it survives the current crisis, it could be an opportunity to implement long-needed reforms.

The OSCE has faced crises before and has adapted in the past, including through the deployment of a Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) in 2014. Participants noted that the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe was launched in the early 1970s as a response to crisis. However, it was pointed out that fundamental OSCE principles were violated particularly grievously in 2022. Moreover, there is almost no common ground, unlike in the early 1970s when the West, the USSR and the neutral and non-aligned countries had different yet converging interests to agree on the Helsinki Final Act. There is also very little interest or engagement in the OSCE today from civil society.

Today, the Helsinki bargain of 1975 of recognizing the Soviet Union's role in Europe (through acceptance of postwar borders) in exchange for binding it into an institutional framework has been eroded. Russia appears to have reverted to a pre-Helsinki foreign policy in which it no longer embraces the tenets of cooperative security until its status as a great power is recognized. Going forward, countries will need to reflect on what they are able to achieve through



the OSCE that they cannot do alone or elsewhere. This may be limited to managing – rather than resolving – relations with Russia. Russia will also have to demonstrate if it wants to be part of such an arrangement and to abide by common rules. That said, it was noted that an OSCE without Russia would lose much of its *raison d'être*.

Still, there remain certain indications that the OSCE framework retains non-negligible aspects of legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability: there continues to be no clear alternative to the Final Act; the violation of cardinal norms is still almost universally held as unacceptable; the Organization retains the ability to support Ukraine despite the absence of consensus among participating States; and the war may eventually imbue the OSCE with a new purpose, including ceasefire monitoring and reconstruction in Ukraine in addition to rebuilding Europe's security architecture.

Session 2: Arms control and stabilization measures

This session provided a series of observations regarding expectation management when it comes to the purpose and capacities of the OSCE, specifically in relation to arms control and confidence and security-building measures – the so-called “first dimension”. First, it was recalled that the OSCE is primarily concerned with arms control and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), rather than other aspects of hard security such as deterrence and collective defence. Nonetheless, issues related to “hard security” can still have an impact on the OSCE's room for manoeuvre and that lack of consensus on CSBMs – whether in relation to failure to update the Vienna Document or to agree on measures related to incidents and accidents at sea or in the air – undermines security more generally.

It was explained how stabilization measures agreed within the OSCE context often require a degree of ambiguity for consensus to be achieved, as was the case with the geographic scope of the SMM. Such ambiguity can be constructive, but it can also be abused. The effectiveness of the SMM was discussed, both in relation to ceasefire monitoring and enabling “windows of silence” for humanitarian assistance, and in relation to political processes such as those led by the Normandy Group. It was suggested that there may come a time when a peacekeeping or monitoring operation could be deployed in Ukraine and the OSCE's experience and role as a regional arrangement of the UN could be again useful.

It was recalled that arms control and CSBMs were developed in the OSCE context in the 1980s and 90s and that these tools should again be used. At the same time, it was noted that the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security enables other possible areas in which to find common ground, for example in relation to transnational threats.

Session 3: Leadership in a time of crisis

The OSCE is facing a leadership crisis. Under current conditions, it is difficult for the chair to broker consensus, there is no chair for 2024, and the posts of all four heads of institutions are up for renewal. More generally, language and discourse within the OSCE's Permanent Council has become more confrontational, the consensus rule has been abused, and there is a general unwillingness to use the tools at the disposal of states. The situation, while already bad for a decade, has deteriorated since Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. There is little consensus, and very little constructive



dialogue. The impact of social media – including during Permanent Council meetings – was highlighted as a contributing factor to this dynamic.

Nevertheless, the OSCE's executive structures (field operations, institutions and programmatic departments of the Secretariat) continue to operate. Still, more than most organizations, leadership of the OSCE depends on the leadership of the chair. While some degree of creativity is possible, the Secretary General does not possess the necessary competencies to act in the absence of a Chair.¹ It is also unprecedented that an incoming chair would have so little time to prepare. On the upside, the view was expressed that this could be an opportunity – by necessity – to reform and lighten the role of chair.

There was discussion about whether OSCE institutions and the Secretariat could function in the absence of leadership, especially in the cases of the High Commissioner on National Minorities and the Representative on Freedom of the Media where the implementation of the mandate depends significantly on the eminent person who leads the office.

Session 4: Rebuilding Ukraine

While the OSCE may have a limited role in ending the war in Ukraine, it could play an important role in rebuilding Ukraine. Although the OSCE is not in a position to implement massive reconstruction projects, it could play a key role in a number of areas that relate to its mandates and know-how. The EU could be a partner given its economic clout, with the OSCE providing a means for countries beyond the EU27 to collaborate on the rebuilding process. The OSCE could also be engaged in the Lugano Ukraine Recovery Conference process. The meeting was briefed on the OSCE's current activities in the context of the extra-budgetary Support Program for Ukraine.

In the wider discussion, it was noted that the OSCE could play a valuable role as a regional arrangement of the UN in the context of Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, for example in relation to ceasefire arrangements and monitoring, even as part of a peace operation. At the same time, it was noted that the OSCE's reputation suffered as a result of the Minsk agreements and that Kyiv would be looking for an arrangement in the future that includes and verification and, if possible, enforcement.

Session 5: The OSCE and the future of European security

Here, the point was made that perhaps it was no accident that nuclear talks such as the SALT I treaty preceded the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act, and that the INF and CFE treaties (as well as the process of CSBMs) were agreed before the Paris Charter. Only after questions of hard power are addressed can the topic of shared principles be taken up. In today's context, this suggests that a return to cooperative security cannot be achieved without first addressing issues such as Ukraine's security status and territorial integrity as well as issues of strategic stability.

In the short term, the goal should be for the OSCE to survive as a platform where actors can engage in dialogue, manage the risk of escalation, including at the conventional level. In the medium term, ceasefire monitoring and rebuilding Ukraine are substantive challenges that the OSCE could contribute to. Only in the long term can the question of how to address the dilemma of

¹ Since the conference was held, OSCE participating states have reached a consensus for Malta to serve as chair in 2024. Negotiations on the Organization's four leadership positions continue.



seemingly conflicting principles – such as indivisible security and the right to choose which security arrangements one belongs to, or territorial integrity and self-determination – be addressed.

In the meantime, this may require the OSCE to do less but to do it better, in the hopes that the re-establishment of dialogue can eventually transform the political and security agenda. This will ideally require a change in approach from all sides, as the current preference to operate in tight caucuses may allow for deterrence but not for sufficient dialogue. It will also require a change in mentality – a tacit acknowledgement that the apparent scope of shared ambition in the 1990s was more of an anomaly than the norm.

If the Euro-Atlantic space only featured interstate cooperation, then there would be no need for the OSCE. Agreed-upon principles are often a reflection of the status quo, but they also embody an aspiration for a better future. And when the time comes to rebuild European security, it would be preferable that this proceeds based on established Helsinki principles, which requires the Organization to continue as an inclusive pan-European body.

A new equilibrium is needed between the real and the aspirational for the OSCE to survive as a platform for pragmatic cooperation. For if it does not survive, we would still need something like it. The tools are there – the question is whether carpenters can be found.