



Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War

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What's new? In December, foreign ministers will gather in Poland for the OSCE Ministerial Council's annual meeting – the organisation's first high-level gathering of this kind since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February. The war has hurt the OSCE, upending its Ukrainian operations and compromising its decision-making ability.

Why does it matter? At the Ministerial Council, and throughout 2023, states will face a series of decisions that will bear on whether the OSCE continues to be a functioning multilateral platform able to manage regional security issues – or whether it declines in relevance and capacity.

What should be done? The OSCE remains a useful forum for bringing Russia and the West together to meet regional security challenges and prevent conflict. Participating states should work to preserve its viability amid the Ukraine war, while sustaining conflict prevention efforts in Moldova, the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

I. Overview

Russia's massive 24 February attack on Ukraine has put tremendous strain on the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The invasion is a glaring violation of the OSCE's foundational principles: it calls into question the viability of an organisation set up to promote cooperative security arrangements involving Russia and the West. The war has reinforced political blockages in the OSCE and led to the closure of its monitoring mission in Ukraine, which deployed in 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea and began backing separatists in eastern Ukraine. These are hard times for an organisation that had helped safeguard regional security in the post-Cold War era, and continues to help maintain stability in Moldova, the Western Balkans, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. With key decisions approaching in late 2022 and throughout 2023, participating states should work to sustain the OSCE, for the sake of both its current work and the vital tasks it may be able to take on if and when tensions over the Ukraine war diminish.

With roots that date back to the 1970s, the OSCE has done much valuable work since then. Seeing its travails amid the war in Ukraine, some observers have predicted the OSCE's demise, saying it is no longer able to promote security in Europe. But the

organisation still functions, and it remains the only multilateral space outside the UN where Russia and the West can pursue a dialogue on security matters.

The war in Ukraine has certainly disrupted the OSCE's work, however. Outrage about Russian aggression has led the organisation's 2022 chair, Poland, and senior officials to denounce Moscow's actions. Theirs was an appropriate response to Russia's conduct but a departure from organisational norms of circumspection, and Moscow has responded in kind. Antagonism between Russia and Western participating states has obstructed normal business, upended the organisation's operations in Ukraine and contributed to a standoff over the organisation's budget. With field mission mandates and the top four executive positions coming up for renewal, diplomats in Vienna are worried that the organisation's core operations could be in jeopardy.

Part of the challenge facing the OSCE at present is that the organisation takes major political decisions by consensus, meaning that Russia (like every other participating state) has effective veto power. It has used this power to block the extension of the OSCE's field operations in Ukraine. More obstruction is surely coming. While there are some exceptions to the consensus rule, if the organisation were to begin systematically bending the requirement, Moscow might well choose to leave. But to drive Russia out would be counterproductive. Particularly in the countries on Russia's borders – for example in Central Asia and the South Caucasus – its cooperation is essential to achieving the organisation's objectives.

Difficult as it may be to keep the OSCE on its feet against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, it is worth the effort. For one thing, the OSCE's work, which in many places has been shaped but not derailed by the war, helps manage tensions from Moldova to Georgia to Central Asia. Its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is an important resource for promoting human rights and free and fair elections throughout the region, and its High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) helps to prevent inter-ethnic conflict by engaging in quiet diplomacy to facilitate the political and cultural integration of minorities into states within the OSCE area. The OSCE also makes a contribution to formal arms control, notably through the Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Measures in Europe, which enables participating states to observe one another's military exercises and activities, among other things.

For another thing, preserving the OSCE will allow it to play a useful role in the future. If and when Russia and Ukraine reach a political settlement – a scenario that unfortunately seems far off right now – the OSCE would be a strong candidate to help monitor follow-through on the agreements that bring an end to the war. More broadly, Russia and the West will have to find ways to co-exist regardless of how the conflict in Ukraine is resolved. It seems short-sighted at best to let the broadest standing regional forum where they can work through matters of European and Eurasian security fall into disuse.

Yet absent a concerted effort the OSCE could well drift into irrelevance or disintegrate altogether. Participating states need to make a determined push in Vienna, the organisation's seat, and in their own capitals to help address several pressing challenges confronting it in the coming months. The top priority in 2023 is to keep the organisation functional, making sure it has the funds to operate, extending the mandate of its field operations, finding a chair for 2024 and avoiding a leadership vacuum, with the terms of the Secretary General and the heads of the OSCE's auton-

omous institutions, including ODIHR and HCNM, set to expire. To assist the 2023 chair, North Macedonia, in negotiating these contentious issues, foreign ministers of states committed to defending the OSCE could form an ad hoc group of supporters. This group should be geographically and politically balanced, with countries such as Finland, Switzerland, Austria, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan included in it.

The organisation should also look for new ways to play a helpful role on the ground. In Ukraine, it could provide civilian monitors to oversee interim agreements between Kyiv and Moscow on issues such as nuclear safety. The organisation should continue efforts to maintain stability and prevent conflict in Moldova and Georgia, and it could step up efforts at reducing tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The OSCE could also help implement a possible future settlement between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Despite its troubles following the invasion, the OSCE remains an organisation of unique value to European and Eurasian security, helping to promote dialogue, forge consensus and manage conflict risks. Participating states would be well advised to assist the OSCE in meeting its impending challenges so that it can keep making important contributions to regional peace and security in the years ahead.

II. The OSCE and the War in Ukraine

With roots that date back to the 1970s, the OSCE assumed its current institutional form in 1994 as a forum for peace, stability and democracy issues. Its 57 participating states include a wide range of actors that have a stake in European and Eurasian security, from Russia and Ukraine to the countries of Central Asia, the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans to the entire memberships of the European Union (EU) and NATO, and others like Switzerland to boot.¹ The organisation runs thirteen field operations that perform a variety of tasks, from monitoring conflict situations and running violence prevention programs to promoting governance reform.

Like other international bodies, the organisation has been roiled by the massive military campaign against Ukraine that Russia launched on 24 February. Both the attack and Russia's reported atrocities in the ensuing hostilities are blatant transgressions of the OSCE's foundational principles, enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975.² Under those principles, participating states committed to refrain from the use of force, settle disputes peacefully, uphold human rights, and respect one another's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The unfolding war has poisoned the atmosphere at the organisation's headquarters in Vienna. It has also further compromised the OSCE's ability to take decisions on important matters.

¹ The OSCE has "participating" rather than "member" states, a reference to its origins as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), established in 1973 during the détente period of the Cold War. In the early 1990s, the Conference evolved into a full-fledged organisation with executive structures, which, in 1994, led states to change its name to the OSCE. A list of the OSCE's participating states is available on its website.

² See Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, 2020).

A. *Reverberations in Vienna*

Defying its normal circumspection, the organisation's leadership has spoken out against Russia's invasion from the outset. On 24 February, the OSCE's Chairperson-in-Office, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau, and its Secretary General Helga Schmid issued the following statement: "We strongly condemn Russia's military action against Ukraine. This attack on Ukraine puts the lives of millions of people at grave risk and is a gross breach of international law and Russia's commitments. We call for the immediate cessation of all military activities".³

While these words were appropriate in the face of an act of naked aggression against a participating state and a threat to European security, it was nevertheless unusual for the OSCE's leadership to criticise one of the organisation's constituents in such strong terms.⁴ Its reluctance to do so is rooted in the organisation's consensus rule, which bestows effective veto rights on all participating states, allowing each of them to block its decisions.⁵ Russia reacted harshly to the statement, accusing Poland of abusing its role as chair.⁶

The fallout from the invasion has dominated discussions in the OSCE ever since. Meetings of the Permanent Council – the main political organ that meets weekly in Vienna and takes decisions on matters ranging from the annual budget to field operation mandates – featured high-pitched accusatory exchanges that often found their way into diplomats' social media accounts. In the weeks after the invasion, the Polish chair insisted that there could be "no business as usual". The OSCE suspended deliberations on matters other than the war in the Permanent Council, the Forum for Security Cooperation (where states talk about military cooperation and arms control) and technical-level committees, including the one where diplomats negotiate the annual budget. Western states staged walkouts when Russia or Belarus, Moscow's prime supporter at the OSCE, took the floor. For its part, Russia essentially boycotted the body's meetings by sending junior diplomats as representatives.⁷

Relations between Russia and other participating states hit their lowest point to date in early March. At that time, 45 participating states mandated an expert fact-finding group to collect information about violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed during the war – which a special mechanism allows mem-

³ The chair of the OSCE rotates annually and is held by a participating state, with its foreign minister acting as chairperson-in-office. The statement was published on the OSCE's website.

⁴ In 2014, the OSCE chairperson-in-office, Swiss Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter, called the annexation of Crimea "illegal" but was otherwise restrained in condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, focusing on deploying a monitoring mission and setting up a political process to negotiate a settlement. See, eg, "OSCE Chairperson calls for diplomacy to overcome the crisis", OSCE, 18 March 2014.

⁵ The consensus rule was established in the CSCE's rules of procedure in 1973. Although the rule does not derive from a binding treaty, it has governed decision-making in the CSCE, and later the OSCE, from the outset. As per OSCE practice, consensus is obtained when no participating state expresses objection to a tabled decision.

⁶ For example, on 14 March, the Russian ambassador to the UN, Vasily Nebenzya, said in response to Chairperson-in-Office Rau's briefing at the UN Security Council that the "OSCE must ... embrace the role as honest broker. Instead, the Polish chairmanship failed in such a role and instead initiated actions against a single signatory State". In the same meeting, Rau had likened Russia's actions in Ukraine to "state terrorism".

⁷ Crisis Group correspondence, OSCE officials, March 2022.

bers to do even in the absence of consensus.⁸ But in the Permanent Council, Russia blocked all decisions on Ukraine. Frustrated, Western diplomats contemplated using the “consensus minus one” rule, which states had invoked in the early 1990s to temporarily exclude the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from the OSCE’s predecessor group on the grounds of massive human rights violations. In late March, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki published his “ten-point plan to save Ukraine”, which included a call to “exclude Russia from all international organisations”.⁹ While Morawiecki did not mention the OSCE by name, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba did, repeatedly calling on participating states to kick Russia out of the body.¹⁰

Russia, in turn, hinted that it might pull out of the OSCE. On 3 March, after the expert fact-finding group was formed, Russian foreign ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said: “Moscow is not yet considering withdrawing from the OSCE, or suspending membership, but [its] patience is not unlimited”.¹¹ But Moscow did not follow through, as the effort to suspend Russia failed to gain momentum in Vienna. The “consensus minus one” rule was unlikely to be a useful workaround for taking peace and security decisions Moscow disapproved of, as Russia’s close supporters, foremost among them Belarus, would have continued to block decisions about Ukraine. In any case, many Vienna-based diplomats (as well as Crisis Group) argued against invoking the rule, as Russia’s exclusion would have deprived the OSCE of a major asset – its ability to provide a platform for pragmatic cooperation between the West and Russia in security affairs – and jeopardised its conflict mitigation role.¹²

B. *Impact on the Ground*

In addition to the acrimony it caused in Vienna, Russia’s 2022 military campaign has had an impact on both the OSCE’s field missions and its mediation activities, albeit to varying degrees.

⁸ The fact-finding expert group was created via the Moscow Mechanism, which allows participating states to initiate an investigation into human rights violations over the opposition of the state under scrutiny. A minimum of ten states are needed to invoke the Moscow Mechanism. On 3 March, 45 states invoked it to “address the human rights and humanitarian impacts of the Russian Federation’s invasion and acts of war, supported by Belarus, on the people of Ukraine, within Ukraine’s internationally recognised borders and territorial waters”. On 2 June, after the expert group had presented its conclusions, the same 45 states ordered a follow-up investigation, and, on 28 July, 38 of them initiated a second fact-finding group “to examine alleged human rights violations in the Russian Federation”.

⁹ Mateusz Morawiecki, “Poland’s 10-point plan to save Ukraine”, *Politico*, 25 March 2022.

¹⁰ At the OSCE Annual Security Review Conference in June, for example, Kuleba said: “It is common sense that after all Russia has done, it should not be present at this table. People say OSCE lacks appropriate suspension mechanisms. Well, then, there needs to be a precedent. Set up a procedure and get them out”. “Statement by H.E. Dmytro Kuleba, Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs, at the OSCE Annual Security Review Conference”, OSCE, 28 June 2022.

¹¹ “Russia is not considering leaving the OSCE”, TASS, 3 March 2022 (Russian).

¹² Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats, Vienna, October 2022. See also Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Ukraine calls for suspending Russia from the OSCE”, *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, 30 June 2022; and David Lanz and Olesya Vartanyan, “Preserving the OSCE at a Time of War”, Crisis Group Commentary, 21 March 2022.

1. Ukraine activities

The OSCE field missions in Ukraine, the organisation's most prominent before Russia's February invasion, have been hardest hit. In 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea and backed the separatists asserting control over parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, the OSCE mounted a far-reaching response. With agreement from Kyiv and Moscow, it deployed a monitoring mission – the largest field operation in its history – to serve as its eyes and ears on the ground and help reduce violence along the line of contact between government-controlled Ukraine and the self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk.¹³

When the February invasion began, however, the mission was suddenly in peril. The OSCE scrambled to evacuate the close to 500 remaining international monitors on the ground. The evacuation was difficult: fighting was escalating, and the mission had no plan in place for getting so many people out quickly. Even so, all the mission's international staff left Ukraine within two weeks. The OSCE also sought to facilitate the evacuation or relocation of its Ukrainian staff, although some preferred to stay behind with their families, while logistical challenges and local laws hampered the departure of others.¹⁴ In April, pro-Russian forces arrested six Ukrainian mission staff in Donetsk and Luhansk; three were later released, one awaits trial and two were sentenced to thirteen years in jail on almost certainly fabricated espionage charges.¹⁵

With its mandate expiring on 30 March, the OSCE Secretariat proposed “hibernating” the mission.¹⁶ Hibernation would have paused operations, but preserved the mission as a legal entity, making it possible to quickly start it up in the future. But Russia opposed the proposal, forcing the mission to close. The same happened to the OSCE's second, much smaller field operation in Ukraine – an office in Kyiv with 50 mostly national staff who were assisting the Ukrainian government with demining, environmental protection and election projects. This office's mandate ran out on 30 June, and Russia again opposed extending the mission. Some of its projects will continue, however, under the support program for Ukraine launched on 1 November.¹⁷ Creating this program did not require a consensus decision of the participating states as it consists of “extrabudgetary” projects managed by the OSCE Secretariat – similar to the projects the OSCE runs in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

¹³ See “A Peaceful Presence – The First Five Years of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine”, OSCE, 29 June 2021.

¹⁴ Reasons for staying in Ukraine varied. Some did so because of poor communication on the part of those responsible for the evacuation; others because the war restricted their mobility; and still others because they met the conditions to be drafted into the Ukrainian armed forces and were prohibited from leaving. Crisis Group interviews, OSCE officials, Vienna and by telephone, March, June and October 2022. See also Christopher Miller and Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Inside the OSCE's botched withdrawal from Ukraine”, *Politico*, 10 June 2022.

¹⁵ “Russian separatists in Luhansk convict ex-OSCE staff of treason”, Al Jazeera, 19 September 2022.

¹⁶ Crisis Group correspondence, OSCE officials, March 2022. Crisis Group supported the proposal to hibernate the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine. Lanz and Vartanyan, “Preserving the OSCE at a Time of War”, op. cit.

¹⁷ “New Donor-funded Support Programme for Ukraine”, OSCE, 1 November 2022. The program consists of 23 projects that require €28.7 million in voluntary contributions for the period August 2022 to July 2025. See Stephanie Liechtenstein, “Exclusive: OSCE to invest 28.7 million euros in support program in Ukraine”, *Security and Human Rights Monitor*, 27 October 2022.

Before 24 February, the OSCE also acted as a mediator in Ukraine, bringing together representatives from Moscow, Kyiv and the separatist entities in the Trilateral Contact Group. This group negotiated implementation of the 2014 and 2015 Minsk agreements, which set the terms for what was to be the reintegration of the separatist-controlled entities in Donetsk and Luhansk into Ukraine before Russia's all-out invasion and subsequent events rendered these provisions moot. While OSCE-sponsored negotiations did not settle the conflict in eastern Ukraine, the organisation did help to broker truces during the pre-2022 period, for example in July 2020, leading to a marked reduction in hostilities. The OSCE talks also helped improve the situation of the civilian population in conflict-affected areas. For example, they yielded arrangements enabling civilians to cross the line of separation, at least until crossings significantly decreased during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸

The OSCE's mediation role did not survive the turn of events in 2022, however. The Minsk agreements became defunct in February, when Russia recognised the separatist-controlled entities' independence; reintegration was henceforth off the table as far as the Kremlin was concerned, in effect dismantling the framework within which the OSCE had been working. The framework's lapsed relevance was confirmed in September, when Russia proclaimed it was annexing the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk, as well as the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions.

After the Trilateral Contact Group's collapse deprived the OSCE's special representative for Ukraine, Mikko Kinnunen, of his main function, which was to mediate talks within this format, he might nevertheless have used his good offices in other ways. For example, he could have facilitated humanitarian access or prisoner exchanges, drawing on the experience and contacts the OSCE has built up since 2014. But Poland, as OSCE chair, did not want Kinnunen to engage in this way. Nor did it attempt to position the OSCE in talks between Kyiv and Moscow in Istanbul at the end of March or the negotiations that led to the Black Sea grain deal in July.¹⁹

2. Other activities

Russia's February attack and its aftermath also affected the organisation's conflict management efforts outside Ukraine, though in most cases not as fundamentally.

In Moldova, where the OSCE acts as mediator between the government in Chisinau and de facto authorities in Tiraspol, the seat of separatist Transnistria, the 2022 surge in hostilities in Ukraine curtailed parts of the settlement process but did not stop its work entirely. At the international level, the process has taken place in the so-called 5+2 format. The "5" in this equation comprises the OSCE, Russia and Ukraine as "co-mediators" and the U.S. and EU as "observers". The "2" represents the conflict parties – the Moldovan government and the Transnistrian de facto authorities. At the national level, the settlement process has encompassed regular meetings between the Moldovan and Transnistrian chief negotiators (sometimes called the 1+1 format) as well as working group meetings where representatives from Chis-

¹⁸ Crisis Group Europe Report N°260, *Peace in Ukraine (II): A New Approach to Disengagement*, 3 August 2020.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE officials and diplomats, Vienna, Geneva and by telephone, March, June and October 2022.

inau and Tiraspol would negotiate specific cooperation schemes (for example, in the area of trade and transport) with the support of the OSCE field mission in Moldova.

While the invasion's aftermath saw an interruption in the high-level 5+2 format meetings, it did not end the 1+1 meetings or the working groups' efforts. Indeed, Chisinau and Tiraspol have intensified meetings in both formats thanks to OSCE facilitation, helping to prevent the Ukraine war from spilling over into Moldova – an interest the two sides share, notwithstanding their continued conflict and Russia's support for Transdnistria. The OSCE mission has also continued to help maintain stability by monitoring the situation on the ground and following up with the parties after incidents, for example, in April when explosions of unknown provenance destroyed a radio tower in Transdnistria.²⁰

The war in Ukraine has had less of an impact on the OSCE's work on conflict containment in Georgia and its two breakaway regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – which Russia recognises as independent states. Since the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, the OSCE has acted as one of three international mediators, along with the EU and UN. The trio is responsible for organising the Geneva International Discussions, a negotiating format that brings together Georgia, the de facto entities, Russia and the U.S.

The intensified war in Ukraine strained this format but fortunately has not led to its collapse. In March, the mediators had to postpone a round of talks in Geneva. But, to the surprise of diplomats in Vienna who did not think senior Russian, U.S. and EU representatives would be able to meet as the war raged, discussions went forward in October.²¹ The results were meagre, but holding the talks was significant in itself. It sent a signal that all sides are interested in preventing relapse into conflict in Georgia, and it helped ensure support among senior officials in Georgia and Russia (as well as de facto South Ossetian officials) for OSCE and EU conflict prevention efforts at the line of separation between Georgia proper and South Ossetia.²²

Finally, Russia's campaign in Ukraine has changed the dynamics in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh but has not significantly altered the OSCE's role. The OSCE Minsk Group – whose co-chairs are Russia, the U.S. and France – has acted as a mediator in this conflict since 1995. But it has failed to deliver durable results, and its influence has decreased. Indeed, in November 2020, it was Moscow rather than the Minsk Group that brokered the ceasefire ending the six-week war in which Baku reclaimed parts of Nagorno-Karabakh as well as seven adjacent areas.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, OSCE official, Vienna, October 2022.

²¹ Tbilisi was the driving force behind restoration of the Geneva International Discussions, as it was loath to lose a platform it considers useful for engaging with the breakaway regions and preventing incidents at the lines of separation. The U.S. was reluctant to participate in talks at first, as it was pushing for Russia's diplomatic isolation. Washington changed its position due to Tbilisi's insistence and after Philip Reeker started work as the State Department's Senior Advisor for Caucasus Negotiations in August, which led to more proactive U.S. engagement in the region. Crisis Group interviews, Georgian and EU policymakers, Tbilisi and Brussels, spring and summer 2022.

²² Olesya Vartanyan, "In Ukraine, Georgia Sees Powerful and Worrying Parallels", Crisis Group Commentary, 4 March 2022.

The agreement Moscow brokered, and the Russian peacekeepers deployed to oversee the ceasefire, kept fighting in check until early 2022.²³ But from late February onward, as Russia increasingly appeared distracted and weakened by its botched invasion, Baku began to challenge the status quo. In March, Azerbaijani forces seized territory within the peacekeepers' patrolling area, leading the EU to arrange two meetings between the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders in Brussels in April and May.²⁴ Tensions rose again over the summer, culminating in fighting along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in September.²⁵ More diplomacy ensued, with the EU, France and the U.S. convening several high-level meetings in September and October. Russia, in turn, brought together Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders in Sochi at the end of October.

The flurry of non-OSCE initiatives laid bare the lack of cooperation between Russia and the West in managing the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the failure of the Minsk Group (which has not, as a body, coordinated any effort to advance settlement negotiations since February) to meet the moment. Russia has accused the West of "cancelling" the Minsk Group, seeing the EU's move to step up separate engagement as a challenge to its role as a mediator.²⁶ French and U.S. officials, for their part, describe making repeated and, so far, futile attempts to connect with Russian counterparts to better synchronise diplomatic efforts around the talks between Baku and Yerevan.²⁷

The OSCE maintains some operations in Armenia and Azerbaijan, running projects to promote economic ties, among other things, but its capacity is limited as it no longer has field offices in Baku and Yerevan.²⁸ The chairperson-in-office's personal representative, Andrzej Kasprzyk, has tried to keep communication channels between Baku and Yerevan open by proposing confidence-building measures, but the sides, Azerbaijan in particular, have not been receptive to these efforts.²⁹

C. *Three Scenarios*

In the summer of 2022, as the war in Ukraine continued, much of the normal diplomacy that occurs at the OSCE's seat in Vienna continued to be blocked, but the atmosphere improved somewhat. The Polish chair relaxed its "no business as usual" policy to a degree, for example allowing the heads of the OSCE's field operations to give their annual presentations at the Permanent Council. Western diplomats largely ceased their walkouts. Moscow, in turn, did not object to holding the OSCE Annual

²³ Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°93, *Nagorno-Karabakh: Seeking a Path to Peace in the Ukraine War's Shadow*, 22 April 2022.

²⁴ Crisis Group Commentary, "New Opportunities for Mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh", 25 May 2022.

²⁵ Crisis Group Commentary, "Upholding the Ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia", 28 September 2022.

²⁶ "Fate of OSCE Minsk Group in question after US, France cancel 'troika' format", Caspian News, 11 April 2022.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, French and U.S. diplomats, Yerevan and Washington DC, October and November 2022.

²⁸ Absent the Azerbaijani government's support, the OSCE closed its field office in Baku at the end of 2015. The OSCE office in Yerevan followed suit and closed in 2017.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE official and diplomats, Vienna, October and November 2022.

Security Review Conference, where states meet to discuss global security challenges, even though it was clear that many delegations would use the event as a platform to condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine and beyond.

But whatever mutual good-will these modest steps generated was quickly forgotten when President Vladimir Putin proclaimed that Russia would annex four regions in eastern and south-eastern Ukraine on 30 September – a move the OSCE's chairperson-in-office and secretary general appropriately condemned for violating the OSCE's core principles.³⁰ Further complications came when Poland announced it would not grant visas to members of the Russian Duma to attend the OSCE parliamentary assembly in Warsaw at the end of November or to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to attend the Ministerial Council meeting in Lodz in December. Moscow denounced Warsaw's move as "unprecedented and inflammatory".³¹

While the escalated war in Ukraine has sown discord in Vienna and affected some of the OSCE's activities, its enduring structural impact has so far been limited. One reason is that participating states have been confronted with few decisions of lasting consequence for the organisation since 24 February. That will soon change, however, as the organisation will be required to take a number of major decisions over the course of the coming year. The first round will come in the weeks after the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting in December, when mandates for the majority of the OSCE's field operations are up for their annual renewals. The appointments to the OSCE's top four leadership positions, including its secretary general, are approaching in 2023. The organisation also needs to agree upon which country will take the chair in 2024, after North Macedonia's turn in 2023. Decisions on these matters represent inflection points, even if the outcome of the war in Ukraine and Moscow's attitude toward security cooperation with the West remain the decisive factors for the OSCE's future.

There are three main scenarios for the OSCE as these decisions approach. In the first, Moscow might systematically block consensus, which would paralyse the organisation, severely obstruct the work of the OSCE's autonomous institutions and force the closure of field operations. At risk are field operations in Central Asia, as well as the organisation's human rights and democracy body, ODIHR, which is based in Warsaw, and has been a particular target of Russia's ire. These steps would severely compromise the OSCE's ability to act, rendering it less and less relevant, and depending on their extent might build pressure on Western states to find a way to suspend Moscow's participation.

In the second scenario, Western states would join together in an effort to side-line Russia. Participating states opposed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine would appropriate the organisation for themselves, circumventing or ignoring the consensus rule by taking decisions that go beyond the established non-consensus mechanisms.³² They

³⁰ "OSCE Chairman-in-Office Rau, Parliamentary Assembly President Cederfelt, OSCE Secretary General Schmid and OSCE PA Secretary General Montella condemn Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory", OSCE, 30 September 2022.

³¹ "Statement on the situation with the OSCE Ministerial Council, Lodz, December 1-2, 2022", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 19 November 2022.

³² Established non-consensus measures are those firmly anchored in the OSCE's institutional framework and in many cases based on Ministerial Council decisions. They include, among others, diplomatic activities, public statements and appointments by the chairperson-in-office; the implementation of extrabudgetary projects by OSCE field operations, the Secretariat and institutions;

could, for example, mandate field operations or appoint a chair over the objections of Moscow and its allies. In this scenario it is likely that Russia would withdraw from the OSCE.

Finally, in a third, more optimistic scenario, participating states would find ways to reach a sufficient number of compromises to preserve the OSCE as a multilateral platform. In this scenario, the organisation would be impaired as long as the war in Ukraine went on, but it could continue to perform its functions in promoting regional security during a difficult period, maintain its integrity and prepare to step up its engagement when the situation improves. It is this last scenario that participating states should work toward, both to safeguard the OSCE's existing contributions and to preserve the organisation's ability to play a useful role in the future.

III. Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE

Despite the pressures the OSCE faces as war rages in Europe, no participating state has openly questioned whether the organisation should continue to exist. Diplomats in Vienna almost uniformly see the value in preserving it, arguing that it offers a useful diplomatic platform and contributes to preventing and managing conflicts on the ground.³³ But given the political friction generated by Russia's war in Ukraine, preserving the OSCE will require a determined effort. There are significant risks of paralysis and disintegration, which states can mitigate only if they step up efforts. Against this backdrop, the OSCE's supporters should focus on the following priorities as they navigate the thicket of challenges facing them in the coming period.

1. Mobilise political support for compromise

Because of the OSCE's consensus rule, the organisation is especially dependent on compromise among its participating states in order to operate as an institution. Normally, the OSCE's active diplomatic scene, centred around the Hofburg palace in Vienna, is where compromise happens. But given the Ukraine war's fallout, diplomatic efforts in Vienna are increasingly failing to deliver results. The organisation's proponents therefore will need to find a way to mobilise high-level attention and, in particular, more effective political support for compromise. December's Ministerial Council meeting in Lodz offers an opportunity for high-level engagement. But Council meetings are highly scripted, offering little space and time for negotiations among ministers.

One way to give these efforts a lasting boost might be to form an ad hoc group of countries that would commit to defending the OSCE and supporting North Macedonia, which will be the 2023 chair, as well as future chairs, in negotiating contentious points. Such a group should be geographically and politically balanced. In addition

and a range of actions the secretary general can take to promote the OSCE's mandate across the "conflict cycle", including early warning, mediation support and post-conflict rehabilitation; as well as fact-finding missions and investigation teams that a certain number of participating states can establish, for example via the Moscow Mechanism (see footnote 8).

³³ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats, Vienna, Geneva and by telephone, September and October 2022.

to North Macedonia and Finland (which has already been selected chair for 2025), it could include Austria and Switzerland – both non-NATO Western countries that have long supported the OSCE.³⁴ As balances to the Western representatives, the group could also include Kazakhstan, which is likewise a non-NATO country and strong OSCE backer (having hosted its last summit in 2010), and Uzbekistan, which has a history of seeking a balanced foreign policy and shown a surge of interest in the OSCE in recent years. After a launch at a meeting of foreign ministers, the group could reach out to other states, urging them to work together to preserve the OSCE, and offering to propose solutions for critical issues, for example the appointment of a 2024 chair.

2. Keep Russia in the organisation

An important dilemma for the OSCE in the coming months is how to deal with Russia. As noted, Moscow's war of aggression in Ukraine constitutes a flagrant violation of the OSCE's core principles and the fallout is curtailing the organisation's ability to act. By far the biggest contribution to the OSCE's survival at this point would be for Russia to call off its war in Ukraine, withdraw its forces and reverse its claims of having annexed parts of the country.

But this scenario does not seem realistic at present, unfortunately, and having Russia among the participating states is still key to the OSCE's usefulness as a body, including for Western countries. In places where Russia remains influential, the OSCE offers a platform for coming up with security arrangements that enjoy broad acceptance. The OSCE's mediation in Moldova, where it regularly engages with de facto authorities in Transdniestria, and in Georgia, where it maintains contacts between Tbilisi and the de facto authorities in South Ossetia, would not be possible were it not for Russia's buy-in. The same was true of the now defunct OSCE monitoring mission in Ukraine, which operated in the separatist-run portions of Donetsk and Luhansk, albeit with restrictions.

While keeping Russia in is therefore critical to the OSCE's continued relevance, it is equally important to prevent the organisation's paralysis. Balancing these two aims is a challenge, foremost for the country chairing the OSCE. That balancing requires pragmatism as well as attention to debates inside Russia, which has long been ambivalent about the OSCE. On one hand, Moscow has valued the OSCE for its pan-European reach and the platform it offers to speak as equals with the U.S. and European powers. On the other, Moscow criticises what it characterises as anti-Russian bias, an excessive focus on security in states formerly part of the Soviet Union and the West's instrumental use of the OSCE's human rights mechanisms.³⁵ While parts of the security services and presidential administration have advocated for Russia's withdrawal, the foreign ministry has countered them, arguing that Russia has little to gain from exiting the OSCE and should stay inside.³⁶

³⁴ Along with Sweden, Germany and Poland, Austria and Switzerland are the only countries that have chaired the OSCE twice: Austria in 2000 and 2017, and Switzerland in 1996 and 2014.

³⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian OSCE expert, October 2022. See also Andrey Kortunov, "To stay or not to stay? Seven concerns Russia has about the OSCE", Russian International Affairs Council, 19 May 2021.

³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian OSCE expert, October 2022.

Against this backdrop, the question that will confront participating states is how far they can go without causing Russia's withdrawal from the OSCE. Diplomats in Vienna say it is difficult to know the answer, given the unpredictability of decision-making in Moscow.³⁷ But there are certain potential red lines that, if crossed, could well lead the Kremlin to pull out.

Four potential triggers merit particular attention. One would be invocation of the "consensus minus one" rule to suspend Russia's participation in OSCE decision-making. This step would almost certainly lead to withdrawal, as it did at the outset of the Ukraine invasion, when Russia pulled out of the Council of Europe, pre-empting an expected expulsion.³⁸ Another possible tripwire would be for the OSCE parliamentary assembly to exclude members of the Russian Duma. The assembly has no legislative power but enables contact among parliamentarians of participating states. Though of little practical consequence, the Duma members' exclusion could amplify Russian voices wanting to pull out of the OSCE and convince the Kremlin to go down that path.³⁹ A third red line might be crossed if the OSCE, through the projects the Secretariat helps run in Kyiv, were to provide direct support to the Ukrainian war effort. A fourth scenario might arise if Western states were to use unprecedented means of pushing through decisions on matters that have traditionally been subject to the consensus rule, for example appointing a chair or mandating a field operation.

If Russia were to escalate the war in Ukraine dramatically, for example by using nuclear weapons, Russia's suspension from the OSCE would be inevitable. Unless and until that happens, however, the participating states should steer clear of these actions.

3. Keep operations authorised and funded

To keep the OSCE functioning smoothly, it is important that participating states agree on the 2023 budget before the end of the year. The organisation has limped along in 2022 without a budget owing to a rift between Armenia and Azerbaijan over funding for the activities of the Minsk Group co-chairs, as well as Russia's reluctance to fund ODIHR.⁴⁰ With no approved yearly budget, the OSCE has been compelled to operate with monthly allotments based on the last approved budget, that of 2021.⁴¹ This makeshift approach poses many problems. The OSCE is unable to adapt to new developments, allocate funds to new activities or create new staff positions. With rising inflation, OSCE staff face a net salary loss, which is particularly onerous in countries hosting field operations where price increases have been especially sharp; in Moldova, for example, the burden has already led key staff to resign.⁴²

There are several moves that participating states can make to end this dysfunctional status quo. Capitals need to focus on this problem, redoubling efforts to find a solution on the budget and putting pressure on the states that are preventing a com-

³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats, Vienna, October 2022.

³⁸ "Russia quits Council of Europe rights watchdog", Reuters, 15 March 2022.

³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Russian OSCE expert, October 2022.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats and officials, Vienna, October 2022.

⁴¹ The 2021 total budget of the OSCE amounted to €138.2 million. This figure does not include voluntary contributions to extrabudgetary projects.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, OSCE official, Vienna, October 2022.

promise. The proposed ad hoc supporters' group could help make this push. If consensus continues to be elusive, states could proceed with funding the budget's non-programmatic components – for example, infrastructure costs and inflation adjustments to salaries – while continuing to use monthly allotments based on the 2021 budget for the rest of the OSCE's operations.⁴³ In the long run, to avoid similar delays, states should consider reforming the budget cycle, for example introducing multi-year budgets.⁴⁴

Beyond the budget, the other logjam that requires immediate attention is mandate renewal for the OSCE's field missions. Participating states place high value on these missions, and extending their mandates at year's end is usually a formality.⁴⁵ But diplomats worry that some missions – for example, the OSCE office in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, which has a difficult relationship with the government, or the missions in Moldova and Bosnia, which are headed by U.S. diplomats (whose work Moscow might wish to impede) – could come under pressure.⁴⁶ It is important for participating states, anticipating these dynamics, to train their sights on achieving a timely extension of the field operations' mandates as they are now. A decision to extend current mandates would send a strong signal that states do not want the fallout from the war in Ukraine to jeopardise the OSCE's operations elsewhere.

4. Avoid a leadership crisis

Another risk in the coming years is a leadership crisis at the political and executive levels. The OSCE's political leadership in two of the next three years is clear: North Macedonia will act as chair in 2023, while Finland will take over in 2025. For 2024, Estonia had declared its interest in chairing but, in contrast to Finland for 2025, failed to obtain consensus at the December 2021 Ministerial Council meeting in Stockholm, due to Russia's opposition. Tallinn has, however, maintained its candidacy, which would make any other contender entering the race look like a competitor with Estonia. Such jockeying is unusual in the OSCE, and it would be out of the question for Estonia's fellow EU countries in this instance.⁴⁷ The decision about the 2024 chair therefore remains pending.

⁴³ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats, Vienna, Geneva and by telephone, October 2022. Germany also hinted at this option in a June 2022 non-paper (on file with Crisis Group), in which it proposed measures to keep the OSCE functional.

⁴⁴ The OSCE's secretary general from 2017 to 2020, Thomas Greminger, made this and other suggestions for reforming the budgetary cycle in a publication evaluating his own tenure. "Multilateralism in Transition: Challenges and Opportunities for the OSCE", Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, 2021, pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ Ten of the OSCE's thirteen field operations require mandate extension at the end of the year. Exceptions are the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, whose mandate participating states have extended on a monthly basis; the OSCE Centre in Ashgabat (Turkmenistan), which has an open-ended mandate; and the chair's personal representative dealing with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, who is appointed by the chairperson-in-office outside of consensus procedures. See "Survey of OSCE Field Operations", OSCE, 13 September 2021.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats and officials, Vienna and Geneva, October 2022.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, EU member state diplomats, Vienna and Geneva, September and October 2022.

The vacancy will become a problem in 2023, as the incoming chair is supposed to join the Troika – a group that includes the previous, current and incoming chairs – as well as lead negotiations on adopting the 2024 budget.⁴⁸ Foreign ministries also need time to prepare for assuming the chair, setting up suitable structures in Vienna and their own capitals. Finally, the failure to identify a chair would reinforce perceptions of institutional decline. Should the chair remain empty, North Macedonia would have to extend its tenure, either by a year, or by six months, with Finland taking over mid-year in 2024.⁴⁹ This scenario would be highly unusual, setting a poor precedent and sapping confidence in the organisation's capacity to govern itself.

For all these reasons, it is important to find a chair for 2024 as soon as possible, if not at December's Ministerial Council meeting in Lodz, then in an extraordinary meeting of the same body in early 2023. Given the likelihood of stalemate, Estonia might postpone its candidacy for the time being so that a solution can be identified. Western states may be able to help by supporting Estonia in assuming another high-level role in the OSCE or in the EU in the near future. As for other candidates, Spain has indicated it would be ready to take over in 2024, as has Kazakhstan. Türkiye also appears to be interested.⁵⁰ Putting Ankara in the chair could help pave the way for the OSCE to play a part in future negotiations between Kyiv and Moscow, given Ankara's current mediation role. Countries with which Türkiye has strained relations – in particular Armenia, Greece and Cyprus – might balk at Ankara leading the OSCE, but the idea is worth exploring, nonetheless.

The organisation will also soon need to fill its top four executive positions – the Secretary General and the heads of the OSCE's three autonomous institutions – whose mandates all expire in December 2023.⁵¹ Participating states decide on the OSCE's executive leadership by consensus, and they usually negotiate these appointments as a package. This practice has the disadvantage that if a state challenges any one of the four individuals, the whole deal collapses. A package fell apart in 2020, leaving the OSCE leaderless for five months.⁵² Diplomats in Vienna fear a similar scenario in 2023.⁵³ They expect negotiations to be even more difficult than in 2020, as Moscow and other states with autocratic leanings could attempt to renegotiate the mandate of the institution that they most dislike – ODIHR – limiting the independence of OSCE election and human rights monitoring efforts.

⁴⁸ The role of the Troika varies, depending on the chair's preferences. In some years, for example in 2015 when Serbia was chair, with Switzerland and Germany as the previous and incoming chairs, the Troika held weekly consultations with key ambassadors and helped find compromises among participating states.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats and officials, October 2022. In the absence of a 2024 chair, OSCE Secretary General Schmid has suggested adding Finland to the Troika in 2023 to ensure leadership continuity.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats and officials, September and October 2022.

⁵¹ The three autonomous OSCE institutions are ODIHR, HCNM and the Representative for the Freedom of the Media.

⁵² In July 2020, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan objected to the reappointment of Harlem Désir as the Representative for the Freedom of the Media, which prevented reappointment of the other three leaders, including Secretary General Greminger. Participating states agreed to a new leadership package, which included the current secretary general, Schmid, only that December.

⁵³ Crisis Group interviews, OSCE diplomats, Vienna, October 2022.

North Macedonia, the incoming chair, can help avoid a full-blown leadership crisis. With assistance from the suggested ad hoc supporters' group, it should focus on this issue from the beginning of its tenure, trying to get the individuals who now hold the top four positions reappointed. Only if reappointment proves impossible should a new package with different candidates be considered. In any case, however, filling the top four positions should be a priority.

5. Explore new ways to be helpful in Ukraine

The OSCE is largely absent from deliberations about Ukraine. As noted, the Trilateral Contact Group's mediation efforts and the monitoring mission ended because of Russia's invasion, which also led the project office in Kyiv to close. Consequently, the OSCE has played no significant role in trying to end the major hostilities from 24 February on. Instead, it has focused its efforts on specific dimensions of the conflict, deploying mechanisms that do not require consensus: it has mandated three fact-finding groups; ODIHR has provided an assessment of the human rights situation in Ukraine; and the OSCE Secretariat has started projects in Ukraine to support demining and address wartime environmental damage. But these measures, while useful, do not deploy the OSCE's vast experience in conflict management to best use. Ideally the organisation would be working to encourage de-escalation and preparing to do its part, at the appropriate time, to bring the war to a conclusion.

Whether the OSCE can play a useful role depends on circumstances, such as battlefield dynamics, openings for negotiations and the belligerent parties' preferences. But a proactive attitude from the chair, with support from others, could position the OSCE to make a greater contribution. It is unlikely that the OSCE will emerge as the main mediator between Russia and Ukraine, given the established roles of Türkiye and the UN, not to mention the taint of association with the now defunct Minsk agreements, which are highly unpopular among Ukrainians.⁵⁴ But the organisation could keep an eye on the progress of agreements that aim to lessen the war's effects on civilians – for example, deals to ensure the safety of nuclear or hydropower plants. This role would be new, drawing on the organisation's extensive experience in monitoring fulfilment of accords and facilitating dialogue between conflict parties on the ground. The OSCE also has at its disposal a pool of hundreds of qualified monitors, many of whom have worked in Ukraine before.

Looking out at the horizon, in the event of a ceasefire or a broader settlement between Russia and Ukraine, there could conceivably be a role for the OSCE in deploying a field mission. Even though this scenario is highly speculative at present, as neither party seems ready to sit down at the negotiating table, participating states should ensure preparedness, and North Macedonia as the 2023 chair should task the OSCE Secretariat to develop plans for different scenarios. One option is a joint peace oper-

⁵⁴ According to a survey published before the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion, 63 per cent of Ukrainians said their country should review the Minsk agreements, and only 11 per cent believed Ukraine should adhere to all their provisions. "The majority of Ukrainians believe that the Minsk agreements should be reviewed and new ones signed – survey", *Zerkalo Tyzhdnia*, 16 February 2022 (Ukrainian).

ation with the UN.⁵⁵ The Conflict Prevention Centre – the division within the OSCE Secretariat responsible for field missions – could develop plans for the OSCE element of a joint operation, working together with counterparts in the UN Secretariat, which has also not done detailed contingency planning for a possible mission in Ukraine.⁵⁶

6. Continue to monitor and address crises outside Ukraine

Beyond Ukraine, OSCE officials should closely watch other places that face a risk of violence in the coming years, drawing from its conflict management toolbox as necessary.

Tensions are growing more pronounced in parts of Central Asia, where recent years have seen violent protest, inter-ethnic conflict and border clashes between state armed forces.⁵⁷ The OSCE has field operations in five Central Asian states, but they have limited political mandates and, in some cases, tenuous relations with host governments, which for the most part precludes proactive mediation. The chairperson-in-office could, however, nominate a personal envoy or special representative for high-level diplomatic engagement, possibly with a focus on managing water resources to prevent conflict. One goal might be to try to prevent renewed clashes along the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where competition for resources and an undemarcated border have contributed to surges of violence.

In the South Caucasus, the OSCE is unlikely to lead the settlement negotiations between Baku and Yerevan, but it could work toward creating a framework for Russian, EU and U.S. efforts in that direction to cohere. It might, for example, offer to hold a conference under its auspices with all the major actors – either in the framework of the existing Minsk Group or in a new format. In the event of a settlement between Baku and Yerevan, the OSCE could help implement an agreement, for example participating in ceasefire monitoring and promoting post-conflict rehabilitation through programs to promote economic cooperation in the region.

As for Georgia, the OSCE should maintain a regular rhythm of talks in Geneva and ensure continued contacts between Tbilisi and the breakaway region South Ossetia, in hopes of paving the way for increased cooperation on issues such as trade across the line of separation, water infrastructure and missing persons.

In Moldova, the OSCE mission should continue its efforts to mediate between the government and separatist Transnistria but also address other issues necessary for stability in the country. It should especially focus on the autonomous region of Gagauzia, where officials had reacted negatively to the EU granting Moldova candidate status in June, accusing Chisinau of failing to consult them. Working with private mediation organisations and with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, which have engaged in Gagauzia for many years, the OSCE mission should work to help heal the rift between the government in Chisinau and authorities in Comrat.

⁵⁵ Crisis Group has previously explored various possibilities for peace operations in Ukraine, including the option of a joint UN-OSCE mission. Richard Gowan, “A Tentative First Look at Options for Peace Operations in Ukraine”, Crisis Group Commentary, 24 March 2022.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, UN officials, October 2022.

⁵⁷ See Crisis Group, “Police, Protests and Populism in Central Asia”, War & Peace (podcast), 16 February 2021; and Alina Dalbaeva, “End the Weaponisation of Water in Central Asia”, Crisis Group Commentary, 15 March 2018.

The OSCE should also closely monitor the situation in the Western Balkans, where it runs six field operations, stepping up its efforts if necessary. Through its mission in Kosovo, the OSCE's largest since the monitoring mission in Ukraine closed, the OSCE has excellent access to municipalities in the north inhabited by a majority of Kosovo Serbs. The OSCE's access in northern Kosovo is due to the mission's status-neutral posture, as not all participating states have recognised Kosovo as an independent state.

7. Prepare for Helsinki+50

The OSCE is rooted in the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, a key achievement of détente during the Cold War. The decalogue of principles enshrined in the Act, while not legally binding, forms the organisation's normative core. Before Russia's 24 February attack on Ukraine, ideas abounded for how to make best use of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Helsinki accords. A common proposal was holding a summit in 2025, echoing the OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons' recommendation "to launch a diplomatic process to rebuild the foundation of European security".⁵⁸ Finnish President Sauli Niinistö went a step further, proposing a high-level meeting in Helsinki in 2025 where world powers would commit to shared security principles.⁵⁹ These ideas ring hollow with the war in Ukraine grinding on. But the question remains what the OSCE, and Finland as the 2025 chair, will make of the Final Act's 50th anniversary.

The first step is to manage expectations: the most likely situation in 2025 is that tensions between Russia and the West persist, whether or not the war in Ukraine is still under way. Unless all participating states are present, it would be wise not to hold a special high-level event in Helsinki. A non-inclusive event would be unlikely to advance regional security, and it would sit uncomfortably with the Final Act's legacy of promoting dialogue and compromise.

If tensions persist, Finland could organise a meeting with foreign ministers and explore space for a narrow political declaration. Such a document would not break new ground but focus on reaffirming the relevance of the Helsinki principles and of the OSCE as its guardian.⁶⁰ In parallel, Finland could hold a conference with broad participation from scholars and civil society, celebrating the Helsinki accords' historic achievements and exploring topics relating to the OSCE's role in the next 25 years, including how the organisation might support a future European security architecture.

An unlikely, but highly desirable scenario would be to organise a summit with heads of state to encourage a renaissance of the European security architecture, with attendant discussions of conventional arms control measures. This scenario presupposes a settlement between Ukraine and Russia as well as, under most imaginable

⁵⁸ "Back to Diplomacy", OSCE Panel of Eminent Persons, November 2015.

⁵⁹ Sauli Niinistö, "It's time to revive the Helsinki spirit", *Foreign Policy*, 8 July 2021. A component of Niinistö's idea was to apply the Helsinki model – states committing to a set of security principles and to regular dialogue with one another – to other parts of the world. Crisis Group has supported this idea, advocating, for example, for establishing a regional dialogue platform in the Gulf sub-region. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°212, *The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown*, 27 April 2020.

⁶⁰ The declaration to commemorate the UN's 75th anniversary could serve as inspiration. That document was relatively narrow but proved useful in reaffirming the UN Charter and providing a foundation for Secretary-General António Guterres to launch a number of reform measures.

scenarios, a variety of agreements between Russia and the West delineating at the least exercise and weapon-deployment limits.⁶¹ Whether this happens in time for the Final Act's 50th anniversary or not, there could hardly be a better place than Helsinki to hold such a summit. Given Helsinki's role during the Cold War, such an event would symbolise the advent of a new area as states recommit to common security principles and to cooperation in the OSCE framework.

IV. Conclusion

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has had far-reaching repercussions for the OSCE, and the most difficult challenges are likely still ahead. While there are limits to what the organisation can achieve with one of its most powerful participating states pursuing a war of aggression, it would be a mistake to allow the organisation to lapse into irrelevance. Approaching the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the OSCE continues to do useful work in preventing and mitigating the effects of deadly conflict, and it is poised to do more. It could form an important part of the European security architecture that emerges from the war in Ukraine. Its future will be circumscribed, however, without a concerted push today to preserve the organisation as a functional multilateral platform, protecting the useful work it is still able to do and preserving its capacity to realise its full potential when the situation improves.

Brussels, 29 November 2022

⁶¹ See Gabriela Iveliz Rosa-Hernandez and Olga Oliker, "The Art of the Possible: Minimizing Risks as a New European Order Takes Shape", Foreign Policy Research Institute, November 2022.



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