



THE HELSINKI + 50 COMMEMORATION (30 JULY-1 AUGUST 2025) MAIN TAKEOVERS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 31 July 2025, 50 years after the signature of the Helsinki Accords, the Finnish Chair of the OSCE convened a commemorative conference which was also an opportunity for the OSCE participating states to share views and interact with the civil society. In a very different political context than the one which prevailed in 1975, the Helsinki+50 conference confirmed that the “legacy” of the Helsinki Final Act is still the foundation for a common future, beyond violations and divergences in interpretation. Helsinki +50 was also an opportunity to take stock of the reflection on the future of the OSCE engaged by Finland in March 2025. Improving the effectiveness of the OSCE was at the core of the discussion between states, which also confirmed the need to preserve the Vienna organization.

The Helsinki commemorative event could not dispel an impression of growing ‘EU centrism’, also reflected in the launching of the H+50 Fund. Faced with criticism from Russia and American disinterest in multilateralism, the fate of the OSCE now depends on a limited number of like-minded countries – de facto the EU members. To remain relevant in matters of peace and security, the OSCE needs the civil society, which was given much visibility at the 2025 commemorative conference. However, the necessary involvement of civil society actors into the revival of the Helsinki spirit should not distract from the fact that, ultimately, the future of the organization depends on the governments of its participating states.

KEY FINDINGS

- Today's political context in the Euro-Atlantic / Eurasian area is fundamentally different from 1975: No *détente*, but a growing tension; no positive curve towards a better relationship, but a negative trend. Host country Finland's position has drastically changed in five decades from a neutral/military non-aligned country to a NATO member state.
- Despite erosion and the damage Russia's invasion of Ukraine has caused, all the participants in the Helsinki + 50 conference converged on the aim of reviving the "Helsinki spirit" in Europe. Despite the Finnish Chair's success, significant divergences of interpretation remain.
- The OSCE is in a deep existential crisis and fights for its survival. The H+50 commemoration has been an opportunity for the organization to return to its roots. Even those states sometimes described as its 'gravediggers' reaffirmed their commitment to the forum.
- The small-group discussions among participating states on 1 August 2025 helped identify practical ways to restore the OSCE's effectiveness, including the consensus decision-making rule. But this reflection is a long-term endeavor, with no short-term result to be expected in the current context.
- The OSCE is an organization of the non-like-minded states. Its founding value has been to bridge West and East. This is why, in the long run, the OSCE's perceived strong 'EU centristic' perspective could prove dangerous for the organization's relevance.
- The active involvement of the OSCE's Asian Partners for Co-operation in the state discussion on August 1, 2025 has been positively received, just like Thailand's remarkable contribution to the H+50 Fund launched by the Finnish Chair. It is regrettable that the OSCE Partners were not more visibly involved in the public commemoration.
- The absence of any EU representation at the Brussels level was a missed opportunity and a wrong signal. A video statement from High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Kaja Kallas would have been feasible, just like other high-level personalities did.
- The H+50 commemoration was marked by a strong civil society footprint, in sharp contrast with the 1975 conference which was an exclusive world leader forum. Civil society expertise and engagement are indeed crucial to the OSCE's relevance. However, the omnipresence of civil society representatives in Helsinki main and side events risks further frustrating those states that have for many years criticized the virtual amputation of the OSCE's other two pillars (poli-military and economic and environmental). Civil society can help address the OSCE's low visibility, but the organization's future primarily depends on the political agenda of its participating states and their promotion of its toolbox.

- The H+50 Fund launched in Helsinki is a valuable attempt to protect the OSCE's operational capacity from the abuse of the consensus rule. However, it remains a 'shoestring expedient' which cannot substitute the lack of a unified budget. And the list of its contributors, so far, reinforces the feeling of 'EU centrism'.
- As Alexander Stubb, President of the Republic of Finland, emphasized in his opening speech, the Euro-Atlantic / Eurasian area stands "between Yalta and Helsinki". The OSCE community still needs an honest, thorough, realist and creative debate about the European security architecture that will emerge from the ashes of the war in Ukraine, and about the role that states want to assign to the organization in that regard.

“Today more than ever, it is essential to preserve the ‘spirit of Helsinki’ to persevere in dialogue, to strengthen cooperation, and to make diplomacy the privileged path.”

Pope Leo XIV,
general audience, 30 July 2025

Fifty years ago, on August 1, 1975, following two years of negotiation known as the Helsinki Process, 35 states – including those from the opposing sides of the iron curtain – committed themselves to the key principles of the Helsinki Final Act, ranging from sovereign equality, the inviolability of borders and respect for territorial integrity to humanitarian issues. The so called Helsinki ‘Decalogue’ was an important stepping stone for the European security order during the later stages of the Cold War rivalry. It laid the foundations for cooperative security in the post-Cold War era in Europe among the 57 participating states (pS) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), committed to turning these principles and commitments into reality.

On 31 July 2025, in the same iconic Finlandia Hall where the Helsinki Accords were signed, more than 1000 representatives from 70 countries – including the OSCE 57 – and their civil society representatives, 60% of them born after 1975 according to a survey conducted by the Finnish hosts during the conference, gathered to commemorate this landmark document. The conference’s motto was: “Respecting the legacy, preparing for the future”. Four years earlier, when there might still have been

some hope that a 50-year anniversary could be a moment of celebration, the then President of Finland Sauli Niinistö, who attended the 2025 commemorative event, had proposed marking this anniversary with a summit “in the spirit of Helsinki” to promote genuine dialogue on security, human rights and global challenges like climate change (YLE News, 2021). Unfortunately, in February 2022, just months after Finland was confirmed as OSCE chair for 2025, possibilities for such a summit were shattered by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. As Ukraine’s Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha sadly acknowledged, Russian President Putin ‘celebrated’ the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act by launching another violent missile strike on Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2025).

Today’s political context in the Euro-Atlantic area is fundamentally different from the one that existed in the initial stages of the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe) process. At the time, the Soviet Union, was particularly eager for talks with the West, hoping to secure its Second World War territorial gains and its Eastern European borders, as well as to improve its relations with the West. The Helsinki Final Act was about “deepening and making continuing and lasting

the process of detente” (Preamble). In 2025, the situation is reversed: no détente, but a growing tension; no upward trajectory towards better relations, but a downward trend. “The Euro-Atlantic area is not at peace”, the 2022 NATO Strategic Concept posits (para. 6). Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine remains a direct assault on the principles of the Helsinki Decalogue. We have entered a “new era of immense hostility with Moscow”, as Cold War historian Mary Elise Sarotte famously coined it in the New York Times in 2022. Equally, host country Finland’s position has drastically changed in five decades: a neutral/military non-aligned country when the Finnish government called on May 5, 1969 in a memorandum upon all European States, the United States and Canada to make their position known regarding the idea of holding an all-embracing conference on European security, today Finland has become a NATO member state.

The Finnish Chair deserves credit for having organised this celebration with flair and generosity. The open conference on July 31 was a lively event that brought together government officials, experts and NGOs facilitated by professional journalists of high calibre, thus avoiding formal speeches. The conference was preceded, on July 30, by the third annual meeting of the Expert Network on the OSCE, launched in Skopje in 2023 by former OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid; after one day of lively and fruitful exchanges, the representatives of the member think tanks – including the oip – were addressed by Finland’s

Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen and OSCE Secretary General Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu. It was followed, on August 1, by a restricted discussion between OSCE pS held in small groups of about ten states with a moderator. PS were theoretically represented at the political director level but, for many of them, at lower and / or Vienna level.

We both had the chance to attend some segments of these commemorative three days in Helsinki and to exchange with delegates from the capitals and from Vienna at the margins of the event. Although the debate between pS on 1 August was kept confidential, a number of national statements, as well as pieces of information gathered on the spot, provided us with some clues as to the content of the discussions. The H+50 commemoration was certainly not “ominously quiet” as one observer coined it (Cermak, 2025). Since it was not an official OSCE event – which prevented the Russian Federation, despite its harsh criticism, to ‘sabotage’ it -, no formal/ official decisions were to be expected. However, many lessons learned can be drawn from the exercise, as well as food for thought for the future.

1. What remains of Helsinki 1975 and its guiding principles?

From NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 to Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, the Helsinki promises that were further elaborated by the Paris Charter and subsequent OSCE documents have faced severe implementation difficulties over the past few decades,

culminating in a final blow with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There is hardly any of the ten Helsinki principles which Russia has not challenged or violated, including the principle of the inviolability of borders. Russia's partners are not blameless for the current state of the European security architecture, as John Mearsheimer, among many others, has repeatedly argued. "We all bear responsibility for mistakes, misinterpretations, hubris, and indeed, silence", Secretary General Sinirlioglu made clear in his keynote speech, the first major public pronouncement of his mandate (OSCE Secretary General, 2025).

The statements and discussions at the Helsinki+50 conference confirmed that the "legacy" of the Final Act is just as essential today as it was in 1975. It is true, as a participant assessed, that there was much talk of reviving the Helsinki Final Act at the event, but little in the way of clarifying what it would practically mean nowadays, at a time when countries are so clearly violating its principles (Cermak, 2025). However, despite profound divergences in interpretation – and in the case of the Russian Federation and its allies, a measure of cynicism –, all the participants converged on the aim to revive the "Helsinki spirit" in Europe. "We call on all participants to return to these principles, not as relics of the past, but as the foundation for a common future", Belarusian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Sekreta said in an interview with BelTA ahead of the 50th anniversary (Grishkevich, 2025). Even Russian Minister Sergei Lavrov's tribute for Rossiyskaya Gazeta – beyond its critical tone – was a tribute to the

Helsinki legacy through a revisionist lens (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025a). The Finnish Chair's success has been to lead the OSCE pS, beyond caveats and implied national perceptions, to re-commit to the principles of the Helsinki Final Act.

2. Improving the functioning of the OSCE

Helsinki + 50 was also the OSCE's jubilee – but a celebration without fanfare and fireworks. Like the overwhelming majority of international organizations established in the last century to reduce geopolitical tensions and tilt the balance of international relations towards peaceful coexistence and cooperation, the OSCE is now in a terminal existential crisis (Shekhovtsov, 2025).

The organization emerges in a greatly diminished form from a decade of turmoil in Ukraine, which started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and culminated with the full-scale invasion of the country by the Russian Federation. The OSCE is experiencing its own *Zeitenwende*, this epochal tectonic shift that former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz referred to when he announced a radical change in the security and foreign policy of his country in the aftermath of Russia's invasion (Simonet, 2024). The standoff over its unified budget constraints the OSCE's work. The organization is currently working on monthly allotments that are based on the budget of 2021 – the last budget the participating states were able to adopt –, following many years of zero nominal growth. This shoestring expedient is "untenable", as

former OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid warned (Schmid, 2022). The consensus rule, —an enduring burden that hampers the OSCE’s effectiveness— continues to paralyze the organization’s decision-making, and condemns it to play with ingenious “patches” such as the substantial extra-budgetary Support Program for Ukraine (SPU) launched on 1 November 2022 to preserve the OSCE’s unique 30-year expertise in support of the war-stricken country (OSCE Secretariat). Far from being a mere budgetary or administrative bump in the road, the Vienna organization is engaging in a “fight for its survival” (Vaknin, 2023). The OSCE has always found workarounds and its resilience and creativity in overcoming obstacles should not be overlooked. In December 2024, the organization managed to designate a new Secretary General and a new team of heads of autonomous institutions as well as a working troika of chairs in office. Nevertheless, frustration is currently widespread, despite of the dedication of the Finnish chairmanship, reflecting the organization’s inability to uphold its key principles and commitments.

On March 19, 2025, as part of its OSCE chairpersonship, Finland engaged with all pS in a reflection on the reaffirmation of principles and the future of the organization, with the aim of improving its functioning and examining possible reforms to be implemented. The motto was “Respect, Respond, Prepare” – the very topics of the three round tables in Helsinki on July 31, 2025. Small group consultations on the future of the OSCE were conducted with the pS in Vienna, based on a concept

paper with a series of questions. The H+50 gathering was also an opportunity to take stock of this reflection.

In her closing statement, Minister Valtonen emphasized: “We need a vision, and we need to start building OSCE 2.0.” (Valtonen, 2025b). However, the ‘talk show’ format chosen by the Finns did not allow the exchanges to move beyond brief soundbites in answer to direct questions by the moderators. Beside the Finnish hosts, only a handful of ministers took the floor in Finlandia Hall: Ukrainian minister Sybiha; French Minister Delegate for Europe Benjamin Haddad; British Minister of State for Europe Stephen Doughty; Malta’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism – and OSCE chairperson in 2024 – Ian Borg; Albania’s Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs – and former OSCE Coordinator for Economic-Environmental Affairs – Igli Hasani; and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of Slovenia Tanja Fajon. All remained allusive about the official positions of their own countries. “Is France losing interest in the OSCE?”: moderator Stephen Sackur’s provocative question to French Minister Delegate Haddad remained unanswered. More clarity about participating states’ intentions would have been welcome. Instead, many of the main OSCE players remained invisible to the grand public on July 31, and their official position undisclosed.

Although little has filtered out of the discussions between participating states on August 1, we are aware that improving the effectiveness of the OSCE was key. “Past achievements do

not guarantee future relevance. We must seize this moment to make the OSCE more functional and more resilient”, Minister Valtonen made clear (Valtonen, 2025a); “Without reform the OSCE cannot fulfil its role”, she insisted. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Sybiha called for reforming the OSCE to make it a more efficient organization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2025); Sybiha openly referred to “change” in the decision-making process. “Today’s discussions have helped identify practical ways to restore the organisation’s effectiveness,” U.K. Permanent Representative to the OSCE Neil Holland summarized (Holland, 2025). The consensus rule seems to have been at the heart of the exchanges on August 1. Is consensus the vector of a common ambition, one ambassador asked? Or is it just a pretext to block the organization? Although Russia objected to any evolution, a majority of pS agreed that the OSCE would benefit from a limitation of this decision-making mode when it comes to administrative issues – such as the unified budget. Other structural OSCE difficulties – the ‘top job’ positions, the chairpersonship-in-office, the OSCE legal personality – were also raised. The idea of an alphabetically rotating chairpersonship was again circulated – something that would certainly generate more problems than solutions. The Russian Federation eventually coped with the small group discussion format, despite having previously criticized

it. Worth being mentioned: the United States and Russia were the two only pS that committed to circulate a food-for-thought paper ahead of H+50, which many of their peers found encouraging.

3. Inclusivity or a like-minded club?

The concept paper circulated in March 2025 by the Finnish Chair emphasized that “the OSCE (...) is inclusive and egalitarian, bringing together non-like-minded states to work together to improve comprehensive security”. However, on this particular point, the Helsinki commemorative event left observers with an ambiguous impression.

Understandably, the Russian Federation (represented by the deputy head of its OSCE mission, Maxim Buyakevich) and its allies kept a low profile during the H+50 conference – “frozen out of proceedings” (Cermak, 2025). Ahead of the Helsinki conference, Moscow had sent a letter to its peers, criticizing the format of the meeting and justifying its low-level participation.¹ Not coincidentally, the presence of Belarussian Deputy Minister Sekretar was not publicized by the Finnish hosts. Although Finland avoided the precedent set by Poland in

¹ Although the exact content of this letter remains unknown to us, the article circulated by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on 1 August, an accumulation of harsh critics against the OSCE, gives a glimpse of Russia’s frustration with regard to the Organization (see References).

2022 - banning Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov from entering the country to attend the upcoming OSCE Ministerial Council in Łódź² - and rightfully made sure that all the 57 pS could be represented at the H+50 conference, the 2025 Chair could not dispel a feeling of growing like-mindedness - what the French would call “entre soi” -. With the eminent exception of Battsetseg Batmunkh, Foreign Minister of Mongolia, all guest speakers at the three round tables on July 31 came from Western countries. “We need to engage everyone in this discussion”, Elina Valtonen insisted (Valtonen, 2025b), but she was referring to civil society and youth, not to the OSCE ‘trouble makers’. The Russians again expressed their dissatisfaction after the event: “the organisers deliberately avoided engaging in a broad conceptual discussion about the future of the Organisation, and the national delegations had no chance to lay out their positions (...). We believe this approach to marking an important date amid a crisis in the OSCE is unacceptable” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025b).

The truth is that balancing the condemnation of Russia’s aggression in the strongest possible terms and its right

to express its position was a delicate exercise. Finland did its best and made sure that the ‘East of Vienna’ pS, meaning the Russian Federation and its allies, could express their position in close circle on August 1. Attempts by moderator Stephen Sackur, during the opening session, to open a debate about how to “kick members out” remained fortunately unsuccessful (on this dead-end question, see Pechonchyk, 2025).

The OSCE is the organization of the non-like-minded, Igli Hasani, Albania’s Foreign Minister, rightly recalled. Its main value is to bridge West and East. For many Central Asian countries, the OSCE offers the only institutional link to Europe, providing an entry point into broader political security and normative frameworks. The OSCE is about security and co-operation: if we do not speak about security and co-operation also with non-democratic countries, we turn into a “club of fishermen”, Hasani warned, also calling “not to close ourselves in a bubble” and “not to preach to the converted”. In the long run, the strong ‘EU centrism’ perceived on 31 July could prove dangerous for the OSCE’s relevance. Such a hollowed-out organization would turn into a “second and weak Council of Europe” (Ketola & Reynolds, 2022b) lacking clear purpose and losing sight of its main beneficiaries: the ‘East of Vienna’ countries.

The “interrelation” between security in Europe and security in the Mediterranean area was clearly underlined in the Helsinki Final Act. During the Helsinki process between 1973 and 1975, contributions were received,

2 However, Finland opted against hosting the annual OSCE Ministerial Council that usually takes place each December in the country holding the OSCE Chair. Instead, Finland asked Austria to hold the ministerial gathering in Vienna in December under Finland’s 2025 OSCE Chair. While both Finland and Austria cited budgetary and organizational reasons for the decision, OSCE diplomats said the move also enabled Finland to avoid controversies around potentially having to invite the Russian Foreign Minister (Liechtenstein, 2025).

and statements heard, from Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Morocco, Syria and Tunisia. Unfortunately, today's OSCE Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation were not given a voice during the commemorative conference, in sharp contrast to the pro-Gaza demonstration taking place outside of Finlandia Hall. Pia Kauma, president emerita of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, and – predictably – Ian Borg, Malta's Foreign Minister, were the only ones to mention the Partners for Co-operation. OSCE Mediterranean Partners Algeria, Israel and Morocco and Asian Partners Japan, Korea and Thailand were represented in the Finnish capital – the latter contributing to the H+50 Fund (see hereafter). During the discussion on August 1, the Asian partners – Korea in particular – underlined the value of the OSCE legacy for other regions, especially South-East Asia. Even if the Gaza crisis certainly represented an additional hindrance for the Chair, one may regret that the OSCE Partners were not more visibly involved in the commemoration.

4. Where was the EU?

"The Europeans need to take the lead", French Minister Delegate Benjamin Haddad encouraged at the round table "Prepare". This sounded like a profound contradiction to the marked absence of any EU representation at Brussels level. The EU was only represented by its permanent representative to the OSCE, Ambassador Rasa Ostrauskaite. Referring to the absence of high-level EU representation, a senior European diplomat told us: "I am ashamed of my Europe".

The relationship between the EU and the OSCE has never been an easy one. Although EU member states make up 60% of the OSCE members and provide a significant share of its funding, Brussels has often regarded the Vienna-based body with a certain distance. It took years to OSCE Secretaries General Lamberto Zannier and Thomas Greminger to negotiate a vague and rather non-committing exchange of letters with the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to enhance operational co-operation, which was finally signed on June 22, 2018. Kaja Kallas, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, could have addressed the participants from distance by video message, just like UN Secretary General António Guterres and President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy did. Instead, the EU establishment chose to ignore the commemorative event which closely relates to the past and future of European security architecture, an occasion not missed by Pope Leo XIV. This was certainly a wrong signal – and something carefully recorded in Moscow.

5. A strong civil society footprint, which reflects the growing focus on the third dimension over the last decade

As evident from the many black-and-white photographs displayed by the Finnish organizers, the 1975 Helsinki Conference was a stage for (male) world leaders: Leonid Brezhnev, Süleyman Demirel, Gerald Ford, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Bruno Kreisky, Aldo Moro, Olaf Palme, Josip Broz Tito, Pierre Trudeau

and many others. But as Martin Palouš, former Czech dissident and diplomat, confessed in the round table he participated in on July 31, activist movements of the time were “blissfully ignorant” of the Helsinki process; his friend Václav Havel, he said, was not even aware that Czechoslovak president Gustáv Husák would be signing the Accords. Charter 77, the most important document of political protest under Czechoslovak Communism, would come only two years after. Far from the 1975 state-driven setting, the 2025 commemorative conference highlighted the role of civil society, the “lifeblood of democracy” (Valtonen), in advancing respect for OSCE principles and commitments.

The Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) contributed to the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process with a Civil Society Manifesto on the 50th Anniversary of the Final Helsinki Act, presenting civil society’s key appeals on what states must do to fully realise the Helsinki principles and implement OSCE commitments, what OSCE structures should do to effectively fulfil their mandates, and what civil society commits to do to realise the Helsinki principles in all three dimensions (CSP, 2025a). The CSP also circulated a document called Ten Points for the Present and Future, which provides a compilation of key findings and recommendations made during five expert seminars (CSP, 2025b). A selected pool of civil society representatives – including members of the CSP – held an exchange with pS on August 1, providing delegates with recommendations. The commemorative conference on July 31, 2025 devoted significant attention to human

security. As some diplomats chuckled in the corridors, Finlandia Hall was transformed into the HDIM³ for a day. Civil society representatives constituted a significant proportion of the participants in the conference, both in the audience and on the stage. Seven out of eight side events organized on the margins of the main event focused, directly or indirectly, on civil society.

As Nadja Douglas, researcher at the German Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) and member of the OSCE Expert Group, rightfully argues, there is no doubt that the OSCE should systematically incorporate civil society expertise and engagement to remain relevant in matters of peace and security (Douglas, 2025). “The power to tear down walls lies with the people. It always has, and it always will”, Minister Valtonen proclaimed in her opening speech (Valtonen, 2025a). Already in 1990, the Heads of State or Government of the participating States of the CSCE signatories of the Charter of Paris paid tribute to “the courage of men and women” whose fight opened a new era of democracy, peace and unity in Europe

3 Europe’s largest annual human rights conference, the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) brings together hundreds of government officials, international experts, civil society representatives and human rights activists to take stock of how states are implementing their commitments in the human dimension, in other words, the core values that promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. The HDIM is organized in Autumn of each year in Warsaw, Poland, by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine has seriously perturbed annual HDIMs. To overcome Russia’s veto, since 2022, the event has been replaced by a Chairpersonship conference on the human dimension.

(Charter of Paris, 1990). However, the relative discretion of the first (political-military) and second (economic and environmental) dimensions of the OSCE comprehensive approach to security was puzzling. Paradoxically, the only guest speaker who alluded to disarmament was Volker Türk, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. Human security's visibility is nothing new, but its prominence in Helsinki risks further frustrating those states that have for many years criticized the virtual amputation of the OSCE's other two pillars.

Furthermore, an overall 'subliminal' feeling that power should be given to the actors "from below" (Douglas, 2025) and that civil society can 'save' the OSCE was tangible. During the discussion at Finlandia Hall, Ukrainian activist O. Matviichuk assessed that geopolitical interests at the OSCE Permanent Council often took precedence over the defense of human rights: "we have to change this approach", she advised. At the meeting of the Expert Network on 30 July, two experts acknowledged the OSCE's dysfunctionality as a forum and indirectly suggested to "pause" the "official" OSCE to give room to "the field". This trend is to be combined with some pS' temptation to shirk from their responsibility on the more challenging aspects of the current situation. As participants in the annual meeting of the Expert Network assessed, there is "zero appetite" for high-level politics at the moment. "We don't have the power" to implement the OSCE mechanisms, Foreign Minister Hasani lucidly admitted.

"Civil society can help address the

OSCE's low visibility", the CSP's Ten Points for the Present and Future observe (CSP, 2025b, para. 5.17).

Although this is certainly correct, one should not forget that the OSCE visibility lays primarily in its participating states' hands. Involving civil society into the revival of the Helsinki spirit, as the Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA) already demanded three years ago (Ketola & Reynolds, 2022a) and expanding civil society engagement with the OSCE, as the CSP recommends (2025b, chap. 8), are noble intentions. This will not, however, alter the fact that, ultimately, the future of the organization depends on the statement of permanent representatives at the Thursday Permanent Council in the Neuersaal of the Hofburg in Vienna. Civil society has little to do with the instructions they receive from their capital cities. One might regret that "high politics in Vienna inhibits what the OSCE can really do" (Ketola & Reynolds, 2022a, 7). But at least for the time being, the focus should be on trying to convince and to mobilize the "elites" who "are fighting in Vienna" (idem, 8) about the value of the OSCE and the crucial need to keep it afloat. Making the OSCE's achievements visible enough to the participating governments has always been a Sisyphus toil. However, without a concerted effort by its pS and greater visibility for the OSCE on their political agendas, as already recommended by the OSCE Research Network in 2015 (OSCE Network, 2015, 10), the OSCE could well drift into irrelevance or disintegrate altogether (ICG, 2022). Capitals should be engaged, at the highest level, to continue to promote

the OSCE body of commitments, its rich toolbox and to find a solution on an agreed-upon unified budget and other core organizational issues.

6. The Helsinki + 50 Fund: sidelining OSCE funding might not be enough to address the budgetary deadlock

At the end of the conference on 31 July, Minister Valtonen launched the Helsinki+50 Fund — a new initiative designed to improve the use of voluntary / extra-budgetary (ExB) funding for the OSCE to deliver on its mandate, rooted in the Organization's shared principles and commitments.

Beyond good intentions (to provide the OSCE with the capacity to act in advance; to support the OSCE's operational capacity; to improve the strategic management of voluntary funding; to improve the crucial link between principles, priorities and programming; to streamline governance and relationship with donors), the H+50 Fund essentially aims at bypassing the consensus rule, which has been abused by a minority of states and has blocked the unified budget process since 2021. As underlined in the CSP's Ten Points for the Present and Future, non-consensus mechanisms and an increase in voluntary contributions of financial and human resources (ExB contributions and secondments) would contribute making the OSCE more effective in the absence of consensus on increasing the unified budget (CSP, 2025b, para. 2.14 & 2.15). The H+50 Fund's rationale is inspired from the OSCE Secretariat ExB SPU (see above). Just like the SPU, the new H+50 Fund already triggered a barrage of criticism from the Russian

Federation: "Another strategy to break consensus has been the refusal to agree on rules for financing extra-budgetary projects. Western countries, without consulting other states, simply allocate funds for events that solely serve their interests (...). This year, under its OSCE Chairmanship, Finland intends to launch the Helsinki+50 Fund. Analysis reveals that this initiative amounts to pushing the concept of voluntary funding while unrestrictedly expanding the executive structures' powers. Its implementation will plunge the OSCE even deeper into a grey zone" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025a).

As of today, 16 OSCE pS and Partners for Co-operation have pledged to the Fund. The contributions of Finland, Norway, France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Austria, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, San Marino, Estonia, Malta, Thailand, Germany, and Switzerland so far amount to nearly 16.5 million euros (OSCE Chairpersonship, 2025). These figures raise two remarks.

First, contributors to the H+50 Fund amount to one third of the OSCE pS and are all European countries – with the remarkable exception of Thailand, OSCE's Asian Partner for Co-operation. So far, none of the so-called 'East of Vienna' pS has contributed – just like none of them featured among the 36 donors to the SPU -. The absence of the United States is also worrying. This scheme confirms the trend that we have been describing earlier in this paper: the fate of the OSCE now depends on a limited number of like-minded countries – de facto the EU members.

Second and even if contributions to

the H+50 Fund are hopefully meant to increase, 16.5 million is far from compensating, even partially, the lack of a unified budget. Equally, donations to the SPU always remained a drop of water in the vast ocean of Ukraine's reconstruction and recovery needs, evaluated by the World Bank at €506 billion over the next decade (World Bank, 2025). Therefore, the question is: will the H+50 Fund make the difference?

7. The OSCE at “the crossroad of the crossroad”⁴

The wheel of time is turning fast. The OSCE is at risk of being trapped in a form of vicious circle: the less political leaders hear about the Organization, categorized as ineffective by their advisers or de facto marginalized from their routine, the more inclined they are to overlook this available format and make use of its unique potential; thus accelerating the OSCE's exit from the history of the 21st Century. On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the Trump administration could soon be blaming the OSCE for its ineffectiveness. As William Hill underlines, the OSCE “has never been particularly popular, well known, or well understood by US political leaders and the American voting public” (Hill, 2022, 14) despite the active role of the U.S. Helsinki Commission. Although President Trump has paid no attention to the OSCE so far, his aversion to multilateralism, as well as the U.S.' withdrawal

from a number of treaties developed and implemented under the OSCE's umbrella, leave a sword of Damocles hanging over the Vienna organization.

Is the OSCE the “relic” (Bond, 2025) of “an international order that no longer exists”, surviving only “through institutional inertia?” (Shekhovtsov, 2025) Should the 2026 Swiss Chairpersonship prepare for a “laborious and unglamorous” exercise, as former Secretary General Thomas Greminger coined it - without ruling out other more positive scenarios (Greminger, 2025)? The absolute priority, in Helsinki, was to prevent the OSCE from losing its remaining visibility and simply vanishing from the radar screen. Even if the organization has achieved much, “past achievements are no guarantee of future relevance”, the OSCE Troika - Malta, Finland and Switzerland - acknowledged with clarity (OSCE Troika, 2025).

Even if the OSCE remains more vulnerable than ever, the H+50 commemoration has been an opportunity for the organization to return to its roots. One of its successes was to confirm the need to preserve it. Even the pS perceived as its ‘gravediggers’ reaffirmed their commitment to this forum. Belarusian Deputy Minister Sekretar acknowledged that “the OSCE remains the sole platform uniting North America, Europe, and the post-Soviet space. This very inclusiveness must be preserved and leveraged to reboot meaningful dialogue”,

he said, albeit calling for its “profound reassessment” (Grishkevich, 2025). According to pS attending the small group discussion on 1 August, even the Russian representative advocated to keep the OSCE platform “by all means”. Even if the Russian ‘buy-in’ remains subject to question,⁵ neither Minister Lavrov in his tribune for Rossiyskaya Gazeta, nor Russia’s representative in Helsinki, threatened to withdraw from the organization as Russia sometimes did in the recent past.⁶ These expressions of commitment are a positive signal of the importance pS attach to this forum, also attributable to the perseverance of the Finnish Chair.

Conclusion: the choice between Yalta and Helsinki

The OSCE is the product of a historical momentum, an exceptional alignment of planets: the progressive phasing out of the Cold War. Some experts call this an ‘interregnum’. We live the final end of this interregnum, which started to crumble decades ago. This momentum is unlikely to repeat. Rather, we are coming back to ‘business as usual’, a world made of transaction, realpolitik and the use of coercion, if not open state violence. As Alexander Stubb, President of the Republic of Finland, emphasized in his opening speech, “in Europe, we are faced with an important decision. The choice is between Yalta and Helsinki: between the spheres of interest and the use of

force – or – the sovereignty of states and common rules and principles.” (Stubb, 2025). The two options are indeed irreconcilable. In such a polarized environment, it would have been foolish to expect dramatic breakthroughs in Helsinki, as Paul Fritch, former OSCE senior official and Senior Fellow at the Middle East Institute Switzerland (MEIS) and at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), rightfully judged (Fritch, 2025). However, the Finnish Chairpersonship can be proud of having secured the pS’ renewed commitment to the Helsinki principles, despite the persistence of serious differences in interpretation.

A few methodological concepts can be taken from Helsinki. Many pS expressed their support for perpetuating the ‘small group’ discussion format, although being aware that it was a long-term endeavor and that no results should reasonably be expected in the current context. The idea of a ‘group of friends of the Chair’, tasked to identify and propose a few core reforms indispensable to the OSCE’s efficiency, would also merit being carried forward. A smooth and coordinated ‘transmission of power’ between Finland and Switzerland – the 2026 Chair – will be key.

“The current moment demands moral clarity and united resolve”, as the OSCE Troika underlined in its statement. The Euro-Atlantic / Eurasian community still needs a honest, thorough, realist and

5 “Clearly, the outcomes of the event have zero practical value and cannot be used as a basis for constructive decisions”, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a press conference on 4 August (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2025b).

6 “Moscow is not yet considering withdrawing from the OSCE, or suspending membership, but [its] patience is not unlimited,” Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said on 3 March 2023 (“Russia is not considering leaving the OSCE”, TASS, 3 March 2022 (Russian), quoted in ICG, 2022, footnote 11).

creative debate about the European security architecture that will emerge from the ashes of the war in Ukraine, and about the role that the pS want to assign to the OSCE in that regard. “The West, however, and especially the Europeans, have done less than they could have done to show that they value the organisation”, Ian Bond, the deputy director of the Centre for European Reform, pudically assessed (Bond, 2025, 4). The crisis of the OSCE is not of operational or technical nature, but deeply political. OSCE’s cooperative and comprehensive concept of security is a fragile compromise. Despite constant erosion, elements of such positive ‘critical juncture’ can only be preserved as long as all major players have an interest in it and consider it useful. “We either use the OSCE or we lose it” (Jones, 2023). Such a debate might have been impossible in the current circumstances, but it will need to happen soon or later. Similarly, a honest and meaningful consideration of what led us to the current state of play and why we have not been able to tackle it early enough, cannot be avoided, as Secretary General Sinirlioğlu advocated: “when a system crumbles in the manner that we are witnessing right now, there needs to be some soul searching, an open-minded review to investigate the reasons for collapse” (OSCE Secretary General, 2025).

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