

# Trends in International Politics 2024

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## The OSCE in Zeitenwende: How to keep the Organization on the radar screen?

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The OSCE 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 aggression of the country by the Russian Federation. 2022, “the most difficult year in the history of the Organization” (Polish Foreign Minister Rau, *Kyiv Post*, 2022), threw the pan-European body into disarray. The OSCE is experiencing its own *Zeitenwende*, this “epochal tectonic shift” that 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 (Scholz, 2023).

“A hollow copy, a mere façade of a security organization” (Gawrich, 2022); “Increasingly moribund” (Johnston, 2023); “in agony” (Socor, 2022)... Thinkers and journalists have not been stingy about superlatives and metaphors in their depiction of the current state of play at the Vienna Hofburg, home of the OSCE’s decision-making bodies. The OSCE has never been a “good weather” organization. Already in 2006, P. Dunay diagnosed its “crisis” (Dunay, 2006). However, the current polycrisis, a conjunction of external (a “hot” and bloody war on its soil, one “frozen” conflict – Nagorno-Karabakh – violently defrosted and terminated by one of the parties, and a second one – Kosovo – still at risk of clashing) and internal undermining factors is clearly unparalleled.

The 30<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Council in Skopje (30 Nov.- 1 Dec. 2023) managed to control the damage. Malta’s last-minute bid as 2024

chairpersonship-in-office was eventually endorsed by the Ministers, who also agreed on the extension of OSCE’s top four executive positions – the Secretary General and the heads of the OSCE’s three autonomous institutions – by only nine months, rather than the customary three-year period. While temporarily pulled back from the brink of death, the OSCE still looks shaky (Liechtenstein, 2023). 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 one the participating states were able to adopt -, which had many years of zero nominal growth. This shoestring expedient is “untenable”, as OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid warned (Schmid, 2022). The consensus rule, this burden that drags at the OSCE’s foot, 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 launched on 1 November 2022 (OSCE, 2022), which allows to perpetuate the OSCE’s unique 30-year expertise in support of the martyred country. Temporarily remodeling the OSCE as a “consensus minus 1” body, just for the sake of expelling Russia from decision-making, belongs to “Don Quixotism”. As it happened at the Council of Europe, it might just trigger Russia’s withdrawal from the Organization, possibly with a few of its Allies – Belarus first -, and would leave the OSCE as a club of like-minded, the exact opposite of its true *raison d’être*.

At the start of 2024, the OSCE is a *Grand corps malade*, as a famous French slam poet and lyricist renamed himself after a terrible accident that left him handicapped. Far from a mere budgetary-administrative bump in the road, the Organization is fighting a “fight for its survival” (Vaknin, 2023). The OSCE has always found workarounds and its resilience and creativity in overcoming obstacles should be kept in mind. This time, though, it stands at an existential crossroad.

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### The wheel of time is turning fast

As also evidenced by the science of advertisement, our judgement tends to rely on elements we mostly hear about and are familiar with, especially when there is no time to carefully weigh all options and their merits. This is a well-known trend in decision-making, which psychologists range among “heuristics”, these cognitive processes, conscious or unconscious, that ignore part of the information, thus resulting in irrational or inaccurate conclusions (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011). The OSCE is at risk of being trapped into such vicious circle heuristic: 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 “reinvent the wheel”, thus amplifying the OSCE’s exit from the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The absence of any mention

of the OSCE in the Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine by the heads of governments of the G7, in the margins of the NATO Summit in Vilnius on 12 July 2023 (EU Council, 2023-2; Simonet, 2023), as well as its non-involvement in the Ukraine Recovery Conferences held successively in Lugano and London, are an alarming paradox for an institution that still ambitions to play a role in post-war Ukraine.

In addition to the outcome of the war, the OSCE’s visibility will depend on NATO and European Union member states bringing important issues to the Organization. The EU’s historic summit in Brussels, in June 2022, decided to open the prospect of EU membership to the “Associated Trio” of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, at the very heart of OSCE’s core zone of action. NATO has undertaken the largest reinforcement of its deterrence and defense since the end of the Cold War, and has emerged as the more important agent of collective military action in Europe. Although both historical partner institutions are “staunch supporters of the OSCE” (EU Council, 2023-1), these ongoing major upheavals might further reduce the latter’s room for maneuver and its relevance within the European security architecture –

both the current one and that which, one day, will emerge from the ashes of war.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, a possible Republican administration in the U.S. in 2024 could be prompt in blaming the OSCE for ineffectiveness. As W. Hill underlines, the OSCE “has never been particularly popular, well known, or well understood by US political leaders and the American voting public” (Hill, 2023, 14). Although Donald Trump paid no particular attention to the OSCE during his first mandate, his aversion for multilateralism and the U.S.’

ill-considered withdrawal from a number of treaties – including, in 2020, the Open Skies Treaty, developed and implemented under the OSCE’s umbrella – leave a sword of Damocles hanging over the Vienna Organization.

New players are (re)erupting in the Eurasian security game, to which states might swift their attention. The Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO), long scornfully viewed by the West as a “paper tiger” without geostrategic significance, has recently made a spectacular comeback (Oiiip, 2023) and might well convert itself into an attractive “laboratory” for alternative narratives, concepts, rules and standards which sound quite dissonant with the OSCE’s approach.

Hence, the absolute priority, on the way forward to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the

Helsinki Final Act, is to prevent the OSCE from losing its remaining visibility and simply vanishing from the radar screen.

### **The necessary mobilization of the participating states**

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, based on a historical momentum. 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).

The fate of the OSCE lays in its participating states’ hands, and nowhere else. One might regret that “high politics in Vienna inhibits what the OSCE can really do” but, at least for the time being, there is little else to do than to try to convince and mobilize the “elites” that “are fighting in Vienna” (Ketola & Reynolds, 2022, 7-8) about the value of the OSCE and the crucial need to keep it afloat. Absent a concerted effort of its participating states, the OSCE could well drift into irrelevance or disintegrate altogether (ICG, 2022). “Can they be convinced of the remedies for the organization’s legitimacy crisis?”, L. Schuette and H. Dijkstra ask? (2023, 4).

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Making the OSCE's achievements visible enough to the participating governments has always been a Sisyphus toil. Without a stronger visibility given to the OSCE on the political agenda of its participating states, as already recommended by the OSCE Research Network in 2015 (OSCE Network, 2015, 10), the Organization is unlikely to survive. Capitals should be engaged, at the highest level, to find a solution on an agreed-upon unified budget and other core organizational issues, and to put pressure on the states that are preventing compromises. Symbolic proclamations delivered by an *ad hoc* supporters' group of foreign ministers of states committed to defending the OSCE, as suggested by the International Crisis Group (ICG, 2022, 11-12), by their Parliaments or by former OSCE Secretaries General, as well as a petition signed by hundreds of former permanent representatives, could contribute making a push. Defenders of the OSCE's cause should also engage the U.S. and Canada, which support for the OSCE has always been ambiguous.

One of the OSCE's major shortcomings relates to the fact that the various groups of states have different and in part contradictory images of what the OSCE should be and could provide them with. Part of this promotion exercise could be to ask

every stakeholders – including Ukraine, the source of alarming rumours about the OSCE's poor reputation - to specify what it is that they want the Organization for. Above everything, the OSCE participating states, including within the European Union, should stop subordinating the Organization's very survival to their national interests.

### **“Back to basics”**

As always when an institution is in crisis, ground-breaking ideas flourish about how to provide it with a new *raison d'être*, from

*States have different and in part contradictory images of what the OSCE should be and could provide them with. Every stakeholders – including Ukraine – should clearly specify what it is that they want the Organization for.*

Arctic affairs to political dialogue with China. To make a foray into such highly controversial areas is surely not the best way to restore trust and unity of views within the OSCE.

Venturing into “out-of-area and ‘peripheral’ security challenges” (Bayok & Wolff, 2022) is of little help.

The OSCE should avoid getting bogged down in debates on contentious and divisive issues. Instead, let us come “back to basics”, which was the *motto* of the Swedish Chairpersonship in 2021. The wise recommendation of the Parliamentary Assembly in 2015 remains valid: “the Organization should also focus on further strengthening its comparative advantages and focus primarily on areas where it can add value, without duplicating the work of other organizations in the field. In this context, applying the “less is more” philosophy, which

builds on the already existing acquis of the organization, sets new realistic objectives and considers the amount of resources available, could bring the best results” (OSCEPA, 2015, 3). For instance, further engaging the OSCE into demining in Ukraine, assessing and remedying the environmental impact of the war, or securing the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station, would make the best of the Organization’s core traditional know-how.

*As during the Cold War, a “thin” international order might still exist to facilitate cooperation on problems that are common to humanity, such as arms control. In 2024, the OSCE might appear as the “logical venue” to address some of these key political and security issues of pan-Euro-Atlantic interest.*

(Carlson, 2023, 34). If such insulation attempt from other prominent conflicting issues appeared productive, which so far does not seem to be the case,<sup>1</sup> the OSCE might appear as the “logical venue” to address some of these key political and security issues of pan-Euro-Atlantic interest (Hill, 2023, 14). However, I argue that such “compartmentalization” would occur in traditional OSCE’s core “niches” of competence which the OSCE is the custodian of, and not in new domains where the Organization has only limited legitimacy and visibility, such as space or new technologies. “Back to basics”!

In the speech he delivered on 2 June 2023 at the Arms Control Association’s annual meeting in Washington, Jake Sullivan, President Biden’s National Security Adviser, outlined the U.S. willingness to engage in bilateral arms control discussions with Russia and China “without preconditions” (The White House, 2023). This initiative demonstrates that the U.S. administration has not given up the idea to set up a “firewall” (Notte, 2023) around what remains from the collaborative effort of the past decades, notwithstanding considerable pushback. As during the Cold War, a “thin” international order might still exist to facilitate cooperation on problems that are common to humanity, such as arms control

### **Let us not waste Helsinki+50 as we wasted Helsinki+40**

2025 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and the 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Charter of Paris. These milestone commemorations should provide additional political momentum to look ahead towards a common future and strive for a “Helsinki Plus” for European Security. Ideally, this event should also signal the start of an “OSCE.2”.

The “Helsinki+40” process, ten years ago, was an extraordinary loss of time and energy. Little trace subsists of this brainstorming exercise in eight clusters, launched at the

<sup>1</sup> The author of this trend report, together with his ACONA (Arms Control Negotiation Academy) Fellows,

is currently monitoring the White House initiative and will issue an assessment paper in Spring 2024.

Ministerial Council meeting in Dublin in 2012 and furthered to the Ukrainian (2013), Swiss (2014) and Serbian (2015) chairpersonships of the OSCE. Designed to provide strong and continuous political impetus in advancing towards a security community on the way to 2015, guided by an ambitious road map (MC.DEL/8/13), the process, sadly, got stuck in the swamp of the crisis in and around Ukraine. It ended up abruptly in 2015 with no global outcome, conclusion nor closing event – and no ministerial decision nor declaration at the 22<sup>nd</sup> Ministerial Council in Belgrade -. The event commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, on 10 July 2015 in Helsinki's Finlandia Hall, took place with no attempt to establish any connection with the Vienna process.

Ten years later, the OSCE has no room for such error. Especially since Finland is not in the same position as in 1969, when it called

upon all European states, as well as the United States and Canada, to make their position known regarding the idea of holding an all-embracing conference on European security.

The Euro-Atlantic region still needs the OSCE. The Organization can still offer a model for a Helsinki II process from 2025 onwards, as the Common Security 2022 Report emphasized (Olaf Palme International Center, 2022, recommendation 2.1). It can still play a catalytic role in securing space for candid discussion, when the war in Ukraine eventually comes to an end. The rapidly changing international situation may present it with new opportunities. But we need to hurry. The clock is ticking up.



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