

Keeping the OSCE Alive

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From September to December 2022 Belgium is chairing the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation. Whilst political gridlock has plagued the organisation before, the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine has now plunged the OSCE in an existential crisis. This bodes badly for the European security architecture and the multilateral rules-based order in general. This Egmont Policy brief reviews the risk of a full breakdown in the functioning of the OSCE, analyses the multiple reasons for keeping the organization alive, and discusses several avenues by means of which the Belgian chairpersonship can contribute to such an outcome. Irrespective of the way in which the Russian-Ukraine war eventually concludes, the OSCE provides a unique framework for managing the post-war aftermath and reconstituting a novel arms control regime over the longer term.

INTRODUCTION

On 24 February 2022 the Russian Federation initiated a ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine. While the plan to take Kiev and topple the Ukrainian government failed, this dramatic escalation of the conflict that had already been simmering since 2014 has shaken the European security architecture at its very core. NATO leaders immediately labelled the war as “*the gravest threat to Euro-Atlantic security in decades*”.¹ They went on to support Ukraine in a variety of ways and set a new baseline for the alliance’s deterrence and defence posture.² In her recent State of the Union address, European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen went as far as calling this

“*a war on our energy, a war on our economy, a war on our values and a war on our future*”.³ In turn, the European Council took the far-reaching decision to grant Ukraine (and Moldova) the status of candidate country for EU enlargement.⁴ Yet for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – the third institutional leg of the European security architecture – any consensus amongst the participating states (which include Russia, Belarus and others) has proven to be elusive. As the relationship between European security and Russia has become increasingly characterised by an oppositional logic, all three organisations are being pushed into a fundamental policy reset.⁵

Against this background, the OSCE has entered a state of existential crisis. Given that both the Russian Federation and Ukraine are equals members of the organization, the ongoing war is exercising a paralyzing effect. This has not stopped the organisation and its leadership to unequivocally condemn the Russian war effort. Yet the war and the paralysis it causes cannot help but severely impact the ongoing work of the Polish chairpersonship of the OSCE and the Belgian chairmanship of the Forum for Security Cooperation. This Egmont Policy Brief firstly takes stock of the state in which the OSCE finds itself. Secondly, it addresses the question what useful purpose the organization might still play in the future. Thirdly and finally, it considers what useful contribution Belgian diplomacy can make to keep the OSCE alive. However faraway the spirit of détente may appear today, the organization keeps offering the promise of realizing long term benefits for all its 57 participating states.

WHAT IS THE RISK OF THE OSCE BREAKING DOWN?

As the OSCE is founded as a political organization that seeks to reach consensus-based agreements, the current gridlock comes as no surprise. Its level of activity has always reflected the state of relations between its participating states, going through ups and downs. Today, however, the ongoing war has created an unprecedented situation in which all attention focuses on the situation in Ukraine and on the question what can be done about it. This has resulted in an ongoing stand-off between the Russian Federation on the one hand and the European and North American OSCE states on the other.

Because Russia has abused the consensus rule to block the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, for instance, the Polish Chairpersonship has opted to organize a ten-day conference for evaluating the implementation of the relevant OSCE commitments.⁶ This has documented that these Human Dimension commitments are being heavily trampled upon in the ongoing war. While Belarus has kept a very low profile in recent months – including during its time at the helm of the Forum for Security Cooperation – the Russian delegation has been relentlessly pursuing a confrontational approach to all OSCE dossiers. In keeping with its broader attitude to all its Western neighbours apart from Belarus and its isolated stance at the 2022 UN General Assembly, Russia seeks to deflect blame by framing its own actions as the fault of the US and the EU.⁷ The resulting gridlock on the Ukraine war cannot help but result in collateral damage elsewhere, as other regions and thematic discussions that would normally feature on the OSCE agenda are bereft of diplomatic attention.

The absence of any meaningful consensus amongst participating states threatens to result in the *de facto* collapse of all OSCE activities. One explanation for this state of affairs relates to budgetary mechanics. Without consensus on a new budget, the organization must resort to a system of provisional twelfths. This cannot help but severely handicap the organization, as it blocks the funding of new initiatives. Even more concerning is the matter of renewing the mandates of all ongoing missions and

programme offices. As such mandates need to be decided upon by consensus, it is not a far-fetched prospect that these activities come to a sudden halt at the end of 2022. The opposition by the Russian Federation to the renewal of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine has already resulted in the closure of this high-profile OSCE presence.⁸ The Border Observation Mission, a small mission on the border between Russia and Donetsk/Luhansk, and the Programme Coordinator in Ukraine, a classical OSCE field mission, have followed suit. As more missions may face the same fate – including those dealing with hitherto frozen conflicts such as the one in Transdniestria – the organization risks progressively losing its geographical footprint.

The possible discontinuation of all OSCE field activities would inevitably put all its past achievements into jeopardy. Also, it would severely affect the programming of EU financial assistance in the Balkans and Central Asia, for which the OSCE frequently provides an implementation vehicle. In turn, this will prompt a search for ad hoc, emergency solutions outside the formal consensus amongst the 57. The OSCE Secretary-General and the Polish Chairperson in Office are actively trying to set up a Support Programme for Ukraine, for example. With the active (i.e., extra-budgetary) support of those participating states that stand with Ukraine (including Belgium), the OSCE would nonetheless be able to retain a local presence.

Regardless of the way in which different participating states prefer to approach the existing gridlock – that is, by confronting Russia head-on, circumventing it, or seeking to engage it in long-winded negotiations – the overarching observation is that the OSCE is currently on the diplomatic equivalent of life support. Yet the current situation and absence of meaningful outcomes do not by themselves provide well-founded reasons to accept the dismantlement of the organization. Such a judgment must ultimately not only include past achievements, but also consider potential future developments. In this latter category, the ongoing life support effort remains a sound strategic choice.



WHY IT MAKES STRATEGIC SENSE TO KEEP THE OSCE ALIVE

Above and beyond the existing portfolio of OSCE activities, there are at least three strategic rationales for keeping the organization alive. The first and most urgent is that the organization provides a flexible array of diplomatic options to deal with the post-war aftermath of violent conflict. While there may be little appetite to repeat the experience with the ill-fated Minsk Agreements, it is far from inconceivable that international mediation and confidence-building may be required when the fighting in Ukraine eventually ends. Secondly, the OSCE can provide a vehicle for new initiatives in the field of arms control that might become mutually beneficial to all participating states over the longer term. Thirdly, the OSCE constitutes the proverbial canary in the coal mine of the entire international system. The fate of the organization may well be intertwined with the rules-based international order precisely because it includes not only like-minded nations.

While combat attrition is taking its toll on the Russian as well as the Ukrainian armed forces, it remains impossible to know what the diplomatic requirements of the post-war situation will look like. The post-war environment can be born from a diplomatic breakthrough, a decisive success on the battlefield, the sheer exhaustion of the conflict parties, or a combination thereof. We do know that (a) Russia will probably oppose any NATO or EU involvement in facilitating whatever might need to be undertaken, (b) the UN may not be suitable because of the veto-right it provides to Russia, yet not to Ukraine, and (c) some form of international confidence-building accompaniment may nonetheless be called for. Against this background, the OSCE stands ready to provide tailor-made services that can be generated quickly when political will is present. With field missions across South-Eastern Europe, the OSCE disposes of vast amounts of post-conflict experience. Crucially, the OSCE provides a space for all concerned parties to engage with one another on the same level, namely with equal rights and responsibilities. Such a hypothetical role constitutes the most urgent reason for keeping the organization alive. It

might be impossible to fathom today what such a role might look like, but at least the machinery to act will already have been built.

Over the longer term, the conclusion of the Russian war against Ukraine is likely to impose new requirements in terms of arms control. At least for several years to come, the depletion of its conventional military power will result in a situation in which the Russian Federation may choose to rely on its still formidable nuclear arsenal – its single area of remaining competitive advantage. This would prompt further adaptations to NATO's deterrence posture. In time, this will warrant new constraints on nuclear safety and intermediate range missile systems. Even in the conventional domain, the war has already triggered the start of a European defence industrial build-up that, at some point, risks overshooting its strategic purpose. While we are today a long way from imagining ceilings on conventional forces in Europe, it might be not so far-fetched to assume that at some point the Russian Federation might have a well-defined self-interest in returning to the same arms control discussions that are now defunct.

Finally, and most fundamentally, the fate of the OSCE matters not only to its participating states but to the international community writ large. As an organization that has been able to accommodate the interests of longstanding rivals before, it constitutes one of the most fragile components of the rules-based international order. While NATO and the EU may well endure beyond the hypothetical collapse of the OSCE, it is hard to imagine how the United Nations system can operate effectively if there is no meaningful agreement possible among this subgroup of nations. Continued gridlock in the OSCE will not only affect the transmission of EU funds to various partner countries, but eventually rob an increasing number of small and medium sized countries of (part of) their foreign policy voice. In effect, the OSCE is the bellwether indicating the erosion of the international system. The only question is where the current trend stops, and the rebuilding begins.



HOW THE BELGIAN CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE FORUM FOR SECURITY COOPERATION CAN HELP

When Belgium took over from Belarus the (alphabetic) role as chair of the OSCE Forum for Security Cooperation, it identified a list of five thematic priorities for what is the decision-making body for politico-military issues in the organization.⁹ While it may be overly optimistic to expect significant breakthroughs under present circumstances, this agenda has the merit of ensuring a continuity of diplomatic activity and reminding all participating states of the existing commitments they have taken on vis-à-vis each other. This showcases a principled willingness to not shut the Russian Federation out of the international system altogether – hence keeping the door for dialogue open – but instead promote a positive vision for more constructive relations among all 57 participating states.

The Belgian aim for the Forum is to raise awareness on (1) the politico-military relevance of children and armed conflict, (2) the nexus between the environment and security, (3) the women, peace, and security agenda, (4) the need to deal effectively with explosive remnants of war, and last but not least, (5) the OSCE Code of Conduct on politico-military aspects of security. As the latter is being trampled upon in the ongoing war, it serves as a useful prism to engage in Forum discussions on all other topics. The killing and maiming of children, the targeting of schools, and the denial of humanitarian access all constitute egregious violations of existing UN commitments. As such, the Forum can help to bring diplomatic pressure to bear to abide with the Code of Conduct that all participating states committed to in 1994. Similarly, the discussions on the women, peace, and security agenda explore what the ‘full, equal and meaningful participation’ exactly implies within the politico-military dimension for OSCE states. These awareness raising efforts are also underpinned by an increased presence on social media spotlighting OSCE activities in the field.¹⁰

It would be easy to brush off such attempts at diplomatic outreach as ill-fated endeavours that yield

little tangible result in the context of the ongoing war. Yet against the background of the previous sections, they do help to breathe life – however artificial – into an organization that may otherwise collapse. Given that there are sound reasons for not allowing that prospect to materialize, such a defence of the existing OSCE acquis (and further it whenever possible) represents an attempt to stem the erosion of international order and shore up as much support as possible. In that light, it can only be hoped for that these discussions do not remain limited to the level of diplomatic professionals, but instead engage wider policy communities and parliamentary circles, both in Belgium and elsewhere. This is particularly important for securing the long-term commitment that the Support Programme for Ukraine (and potentially other future programmes) will require. On a more mundane level, the most important objective is simply to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina – as the next chair of the Forum from January 2023 onwards – can continue with the painstaking work of pushing the consensus forward and stemming any backsliding.

CONCLUSION

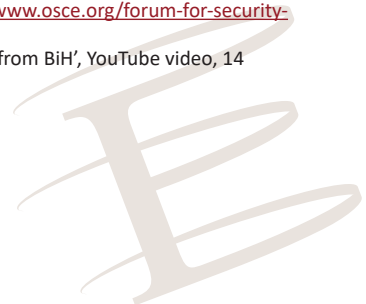
With a high-intensity war raging in Ukraine, it has become all too apparent how large the crisis in the European security architecture has become. At the same time, it is easy to miss out on the small but strategically significant role the OSCE plays therein. The arcane matters of diplomatic statecraft may fail to immediately signal what is at stake. The crux of the current debates within the OSCE, an organisation of non-likeminded states, is whether any form of agreement with the Russian Federation is still possible. Many, if not most participating states are committed to at least try and explore what such agreements could look like – *provided that existing commitments are respected and confidence in the good faith of all parties can return*. If the OSCE cannot be kept alive around a minimal agenda, its demise will inevitably reverberate from Europe to Central Asia and beyond. If the Belgium and all other participating states can make a modest contribution to avoid this worst-case

outcome, the tireless diplomatic effort will not have been in vain. After all, it is not in the interest of any state to close the door on a sustainable peace in Europe, nor is it prudent to forego the instrument of arms control precisely when it may be needed more than at any time in the past thirty years.

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Endnotes

- 1 Statement by NATO Heads of State and Government on Russia's attack on Ukraine. Press Release (2022) 046, 25 February 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_192489.htm .
- 2 NATO Madrid Summit Declaration. Press Release (2022) 095, 29 June 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_196951.htm .
- 3 Von der Leyen, U. 2022 State of the Union Address. Strasbourg: European Commission / European Parliament, 14 September 2022. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ov/speech_22_5493 .
- 4 European Council conclusions on Ukraine, the membership applications of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova and Georgia, Western Balkans and external relations, 23 June 2022. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/06/23/european-council-conclusions-on-ukraine-the-membership-applications-of-ukraine-the-republic-of-moldova-and-georgia-western-balkans-and-external-relations-23-june-2022/> .
- 5 Note that even in Germany – the longtime advocate of improving relations with Moscow – the Chancellor is articulating a paradigm shift (Zeitenwende) in which defence against potential Russian aggression becomes the organizing principle of foreign and security policy, cf. <https://www.bundeskanzler.de/bk-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-bei-der-bundeswehrtagung-am-16-september-2022-2127078> .
- 6 For information see <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/warsaw-human-dimension-conference> .
- 7 Speech by Sergey Lavrov at the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2022, https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1831211/ .
- 8 'OSCE Chairman-in-Office and Secretary General announce upcoming closure of Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine', Warsaw / Vienna, 28 April 2022. <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/516933> .
- 9 'Belgium announces priorities as FSC Chair amidst Russia's war against Ukraine', 7 September 2022. <https://www.osce.org/forum-for-security-cooperation/525387> .
- 10 See for instance, 'BE Forum for Security Co-operation session on Children and Armed Conflict – experiences from BiH', YouTube video, 14 September 2022, <https://youtu.be/YOb9ORGRVpw> .





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