



What the World Needs Now – views from the OSCE Secretary General

by Helga Maria Schmid



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This past year, many of us were shocked by the return of violent warfare to Europe, at a level not seen in more than 75 years. Russia's unprovoked and unjustified war against Ukraine has challenged the foundation of the rules-based European security order.

These are dark days, and the war has a dramatic impact on the entire region and beyond – including on the OSCE. And while we have continuously adapted the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian security arrangements to address changing circumstances, it is particularly important now to consider the tools we need to shape a more stable future, and thereby increase the odds of achieving sustainable security. Before addressing this, I want to start with a clear picture of the OSCE's role in response to Russia's war of aggression.

We all make choices

When it comes to the war against Ukraine – now nine-months long – it did not have to be like this. The OSCE has stood for shared security and co-operation since its earliest days. We have platforms for dialogue, tools for transparency, mechanisms to build confidence. Early this year, understanding the growing tension, OSCE participating States were ready to put differences aside and engage in comprehensive dialogue. On 8 February 2022, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Polish Foreign Minister Rau, launched the Renewed OSCE European Security Dialogue, which

was meant to help build trust, transparency and co-operation, and to discuss the security concerns of all participating States.

Nearly all participating States were keen to pursue this dialogue. But Russia chose force over dialogue. And the consequences are profound.

The OSCE is doing everything possible to support those suffering the consequences. Through the new Support Programme Ukraine – a wholly donor-funded programme – participating States are ensuring that the work the OSCE delivered in Ukraine for nearly 30 years can continue – despite the fact that the OSCE’s missions in Ukraine were forced to close this year¹. The new team in Kyiv is delivering support to the government, civil society, and people of Ukraine. Projects cover a range of challenges, from humanitarian demining, to addressing the environmental damage caused by the war, increasing capacity to provide social and psychological support to those affected by the war, enhancing Ukraine’s chemical emergency response capacity, supporting media freedom, countering cybercrime and combatting trafficking in human beings.

And of course the impacts of the war don’t stop at the border. Whether in Moldova, Central Asia, or beyond, the OSCE is working closely with governments – including through our field offices – to mitigate the risks those countries face, and to help address challenges in order to enhance stability and security for all.

One piece of the puzzle

The OSCE is but one part of the current European security architecture. The role it plays is different from what NATO or the EU offer. This is crucial – because we need a range of tools and formats to address the challenges we face and the array of stakeholders involved. Part of the OSCE’s added value is in an approach that is comprehensive, inclusive, and principled.

To continue to be effective, the OSCE must be adaptable, capable of facilitating coordinated approaches to effectively address global challenges and offer tools to help prevent and resolve conflict.

¹ Decisions in the OSCE require consensus among all 57 participating States. In the case of the Special Monitoring Mission and the Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, the Russian Federation did not join consensus to renew these mission mandates. Both missions formally closed on 31 October 2022.

It is worth recalling that while known as a forum for dialogue and co-operation, the OSCE itself is a product of confrontation. What began in the early 1970s as a series of conferences to overcome the ideological and geopolitical divisions between East and West, is at heart a change management organization. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975 was not an agreement between like-minded states, but rather a means to manage disagreements between rivals and prevent escalation. We need this still today, because we need platforms where all stakeholders are at the table, particularly when tensions are high.

A comprehensive approach

Nearly fifty years ago, the OSCE pioneered the concept of comprehensive and co-operative security, recognizing the indelible links between politico-military, economic and environmental and human dimensions of security.

Over the years, the challenges in each area have evolved. In the politico-military domain, the OSCE has done vital work related to arms control and disarmament as well as critical verification of conventional military activities. This work remains important and must continue to evolve to accommodate the new realities in this sphere, including artificial intelligence. A focus on the environment is more urgent than ever, and in the economic sphere it is clear that corruption is a serious impediment to peace and stability. The human dimension continues to play a vital role, whether considering media freedoms in the era of social media or the role of technology in human trafficking. In these areas and more, a comprehensive approach to security has proven to be extremely effective in helping States build the institutions and habits that are necessary to deal effectively with a multitude of 21st century challenges.

Inclusive

Inclusivity – in terms of both membership and perspectives – is vital to a comprehensive security system. The OSCE is inclusive in the context of groups that have been historically underrepresented in consultations and decision-making on

peace and security matters, such as women, youth and minorities. This features prominently in the OSCE's work across all three dimensions.

When it comes to membership, there is tremendous value in “like-minded” groups, and there is also real value in providing space in which a broader range of perspectives and approaches is reflected and integrated. The OSCE is not a like-minded group. Our participating States have different political systems, different cultures, and differing priorities. They do not always see eye-to-eye, and finding agreement is often challenging. Yet having this platform through which we can discuss the various challenges, build understanding, and find ways of working together is very important. This does not, however, imply a relativistic approach to behavior that violates international law and OSCE principles.

Principled

Although the security situation in Europe is undergoing a significant shift, the norms, principles and commitments unanimously agreed to by the OSCE participating States remain relevant. And accountability is key.

All OSCE participating States agreed to implement these commitments on a purely voluntary basis and are engaged in a continuous process of peer review and improvement. Though this kind of accountability does not bring quick results, it does provide something incredibly powerful – local ownership. This, in turn, ensures the sustainability of much of the Organization's work on the ground.

The commitments are thus a powerful tool for change. And while some of these commitments remain aspirational, they establish clear standards for the way that States treat each other and those who live on their territories. We have seen serious violations of these commitments in recent years, with a concomitant failure to implement agreements in good faith. This has had tragic consequences and has severely damaged trust between participating States. However, rather than invalidating the principles, the violations have focused more attention on the importance of a common set of rules by which all can reliably operate. And here, too,

the OSCE has tools – including the Moscow Mechanism¹ – that contribute to greater accountability – not only within the OSCE framework but in support of the international community writ large.

Adaptive

We will never be able to foresee every eventuality or emerging threat, so our ability to adapt and rapidly respond to changing situations is an absolute necessity – something the OSCE has ably done time and again.

Confronted with the outbreak of war in South-Eastern Europe in the early 1990s, the Organization launched large-scale field operations to help countries build democratic institutions and rule of law, while fostering trust and reconciliation. We responded to the crisis in 2014 with innovative steps that helped reduce tension and stabilize the situation in Ukraine at the time. Our mission helped millions of conflict-affected citizens on both sides of the contact line – including by brokering local ceasefires. And though the Special Monitoring Mission and a separate project office in Ukraine were forced to close this year, the OSCE still has 12 other field operations that continue to assist participating States in catalyzing reforms and strengthening their security.

Addressing global challenges

Part of what the OSCE does through these field missions is to foster coordinated approaches to effectively address transnational and global challenges. It is clear that no one State or organization can deal with a threat like climate change on its own. The Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that our security is not only interconnected, but interdependent. Multilateral co-operation is a necessity.

To facilitate this co-operation, we need platforms that create space for dialogue and enhance trust and transparency. In this regard, the OSCE has unique strengths – most

² The Moscow Mechanism aims to investigate allegations of serious violations of the commitments made by States within the framework of the OSCE and identify actions to address them. Participating States have invoked the Moscow Mechanism three times since the start of the war against Ukraine in February 2022: 45 participating States invoked the Moscow Mechanism on 3 March and again on 14 July to address the human rights and humanitarian impacts of Russia's war against Ukraine; 38 participating States on 28 July invoked the Moscow Mechanism to review the human rights situation within Russia itself.

notably in fostering regional, trans-boundary co-operation on issues like climate change and border security.

We have brokered agreement on measures to address a wide range of emerging threats, such as ground-breaking cybersecurity confidence-building measures that reduce the risks of conflict between States stemming from the misuse of Information Communication Technologies.

In addition to working with governments, we engage with the private sector and civil society in our activities on strengthening good governance, promoting transparency and improving the business and investment climate. And of course we work closely with other international organizations, like the United Nations and European Union, combining the unique strengths that we each bring to bear to address challenges that require concerted, co-operative effort.

Preventing and resolving conflict

The Leitfaden (or guiding thread) running through the OSCE's principles and commitments is that of preventing and resolving conflict. The Helsinki Final Act included the first set of confidence- and security-building measures, which fostered relative stability and security in our region for decades.

Over the past decade in particular, the OSCE has built up a robust, cross-dimensional toolbox for early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, mediation, crisis management and reconciliation. To remain effective, our tools need to be sharpened and used in good faith to increase transparency, build confidence and co-operation, and reduce tensions. But this also depends on the political will of participating States choosing to use and support them, as well as the provision of sufficient resources.

Our work across the conflict cycle has produced real results on the ground, not only through our participation in conflict-resolution mechanisms in Georgia or the Transdniestrian Settlement Process, or through promoting reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina with our nine field offices in the country, but also through discreet activities like mediation with local authorities and civil society to relocate a controversial war memorial, restore constructive relations between political parties,

and bring law enforcement together with women to address their particular security concerns.

Conclusion

Our founders believed that co-operation in the fields of arms control and security, industry, science and the environment, and human rights and democracy, would reinforce peace in Europe and in the world as a whole. They were right. This is the work we should do – the work we are doing. Despite the dire challenges in our current geopolitical situation, the OSCE continues to deliver real improvements in security and stability every day. These activities support our participating States and the people their governments serve. And we do it all with very modest means – roughly 20 cents per citizen per year.

As I said at the outset, I believe that the OSCE offers a unique platform and crucial tools that enable States to build trust and reconcile differences, with the goal of achieving sustainable security for all. We have done this before, starting with the Helsinki Final Act. We can do it again.

The core principles of Helsinki are still the bedrock of security and cooperation in Europe. It is the violation of these principles – as we see with the war against Ukraine – that is wreaking havoc, not only on Ukraine but on so many others – both in the region and far beyond. And so we must remain resolved. Resolved in our belief that the principled, rules-based order is the essential foundation for peace and security in Europe and the world. Resolved in our demand for compliance with the Helsinki Principles in letter and spirit by those in flagrant violation. And resolved in our commitment to continue providing practical tools in the service of co-operation.

These are dark days, but we have an opportunity and an obligation to draw on our experience and expertise, and to evolve – to use the tools at our disposal in new and innovative ways to bring sustainable peace and security.