



From Crisis Response to Sustainable Peace: Strengthening Civil Society's Role in OSCE Conflict Work

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Introduction

This paper outlines civil society's perspective on how the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and its participating States can better prevent, mitigate, and resolve conflicts across the OSCE region, in cooperation with civil society.

Drawing on the Civic Solidarity Platform² (CSP)'s 2021 Stockholm Declaration³ and the CSP's Helsinki 50+ Reflection Project⁴ seminar on "Political-Military Security Dimension of the Helsinki Process: Roles of the OSCE and Civil Society",⁵ as well as the evolving security dynamics, this paper emphasises early warning, inclusive mediation, and post-conflict transformation.

Special focus is given to shrinking civil society space, the inclusion of women, youth, and other marginalised groups, and mechanisms for accountability and justice.

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² See the website of the Civic Solidarity Platform: <https://civicsolidarity.org/>.

³ The Stockholm Declaration on the Need to Critically Review and Strengthen the OSCE's Work on Conflicts to Strengthen Security, Protect Human Rights and Uphold the Helsinki Principles. Presented at the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference 2021 in Stockholm. See https://civicsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/stockholm_declaration.pdf

⁴ Information about the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process: <https://civicsolidarity.org/article/helsinki-50-reflection-process/>.

⁵ Political-military security dimension of the Helsinki process: Roles of the OSCE and civil society. Report on the proceedings of the expert seminar in the framework of the Helsinki+50 project organised by the Civic Solidarity Platform, 25 February 2025, Vienna. See https://civicsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Report_seminar_security-dimension-of-the-Helsinki-Process_Helsinki50-Reflection-Project_Vienna_February-2025.pdf

Challenges the OSCE faces

The OSCE's potential can only be fully realised with strengthening existing mechanisms, greater transparency, and institutionalised cooperation with civil society.⁶

The OSCE was envisioned as a security community where human rights, cooperative security, and economic and environmental issues would be mutually reinforcing. Yet, the predominance of state-centric, politico-military approaches continues to limit the integration of the human dimension in conflict work.

Civil society is uniquely positioned to bridge this gap. Drawing on long-standing local engagement, it brings legitimacy, early insight, and grassroots trust-building capacities to OSCE conflict efforts. Human rights defenders, peacebuilders, including women and youth, play an important role in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Their work includes protecting civilians against violence; monitoring human rights violations and peace agreements implementation; advocating for peace and human rights; promoting values of peace and democracy; building inter-group social cohesion by bringing people together from adversarial groups; facilitating dialogue at local and national levels, across borders and cultural divides; and creating caring economy which helps to create entry points for all of the above elements of peacebuilding.

While civil society's role during the acute stage of a conflict is often limited due to its focus on emergency relief, it can make a significant contribution to transitional justice by documenting violations of international humanitarian law, thus helping to fight impunity and prevent new conflicts. Such documentation may support legal and truth-seeking processes, strengthen victims' access to justice, and counter divisive narratives spread by conflict parties.

The role of civil society is especially crucial in the current situation, where historical prejudices, enemy images, and xenophobic narratives are resurging amid the rise of nationalist and populist movements. Civil society can and should mobilise the public against hate speech, divisive narratives, and nationalistic sentiments propagated by political leaders in their power interests and preventing some parts of (un)civil society from contributing to these negative developments.

Stronger civil society engagement is urgently needed – before, during and after conflict – given the deteriorating political, social and environmental situation in the OSCE region and globally.

However, despite formal recognition in documents such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act⁷ and the 1990 Charter of Paris,⁸ civil society remains structurally sidelined in OSCE decision-making and

⁶ See: Natascha Cerny Ehtesham/Laurent Goetschel. Civil Society in the OSCE: From Human Rights Advocacy to Peacebuilding, in IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2015, Baden-Baden 2016, pp. 363-373. <https://ifsh.de/file-CORE/documents/yearbook/english/15/CernyGoetschel-en.pdf>, swisspeace handout on "Functions of Civil Society", adapted from Paffenholz, Thania/Spurk Chris; Civil society, Civic engagement, and Peacebuilding. In: Social Development Papers, No. 36/2006, P.27-32.

⁷ The Helsinki Final Act, 1975. <https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act>

⁸ Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 1990. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/6/39516.pdf>

implementation. As part of this problem, the vast potential of civil society remains largely untapped in the OSCE's conflicts-related work.

Recent crises have shown both the indispensability and the vulnerability of civil society actors. In many participating States, restrictive laws and shrinking space obstruct civil society engagement. Without targeted improvements, the OSCE risks becoming detached from the societies it seeks to protect.

An often overlooked dimension of the OSCE's legitimacy challenge is its low visibility among the general public. Despite its broad mandate and critical role in conflict prevention, mediation, post-conflict rehabilitation, and the promotion of the human dimension, the Organisation remains little known to many of the communities it is meant to serve.

The OSCE and civil society must therefore invest in public outreach and communication efforts to raise awareness of the OSCE's relevance, reinforce its credibility, and strengthen support for its mandates across the region. If people across the OSCE area better understood its role and value, it would become more difficult – politically and practically – for the Organisation to be sidelined, weakened, or allowed to fade into irrelevance.

Context and urgency

The OSCE faces a legitimacy and capacity crisis, marked by:

- Blocked mandates due to consensus rule misuse;
- Shrinking budgets and weakened field operations;
- Political unwillingness among participating States to act on early warnings;
- Compartmentalisation of the three dimensions of comprehensive security;
- Marginalisation of civil society and human dimension concerns.

In this climate, the OSCE risks drifting into irrelevance unless it reaffirms its foundational principles of cooperative security, human rights, and multilateralism.

Civil society actors have consistently stepped in to fill institutional and governmental gaps – by monitoring violations, countering disinformation, and fostering trust across divides – yet they remain excluded from many decision-making processes.

This is compounded by inconsistent understandings of “civil society” across the OSCE's three dimensions: while it often refers to academics and think tanks in the politico-military and economic spheres, it includes NGOs, grassroots groups, and human rights defenders in the human dimension. These varying interpretations affect who is invited to participate in different dialogue spaces. Effective engagement requires drawing on both analytical expertise and lived experience across all dimensions.

Civil society's contributions span the entire conflict cycle: from early warning and protection to dialogue facilitation and post-conflict reconciliation. Civil society members also support education, essential services, and trauma recovery – especially in fragile contexts. Leveraging this breadth of expertise is key to enhancing the legitimacy and effectiveness of OSCE conflict responses.

Recommendations to OSCE bodies, institutions and participating States

A. Strengthen early warning and early action / conflict prevention:

- Recognise human dimension crises as security threats.
- Recognise shrinking civic space as an early warning sign of conflict. The suppression of civil society activities and backlash against NGOs in a participating State should be considered an indicator of a deteriorating human rights situation that may escalate into a broader human dimension crisis and ultimately lead to international security risks.
- Strengthen responses to hybrid (non-military) security threats. Address instruments such as propaganda and disinformation, cyberattacks, and artificially induced migration crises at borders more actively. Reinvigorate the Representative on Freedom of the Media's (RFoM) work on countering propaganda and disinformation.
- Institutionalise broad civil society (beyond think tanks and academic institutions) participation in the OSCE's first dimension. Create regular and secure mechanisms for civil society to contribute to discussions on political-military issues. Ensure that civil society recommendations and reports are systematically taken into account in conflict-related work, drawing on models such as the OSCE ODIHR Hate Crime Reporting platform.
- Facilitate structured dialogue between the Conflict Prevention Centre and civil society. Establish regular exchanges on early warning methodologies and consider developing practical guidelines and trainings to support civil society's engagement in early warning efforts.
- Appoint a permanent full-time Special Representative on Civil Society. This position should be tasked with facilitating civil society engagement in the first dimension and addressing shrinking civic space as part of a broader early warning and conflict prevention strategy.

B. Ensure inclusive and transparent mediation / conflict resolution:

- Open mediation mechanisms to civil society (including women and conflict-affected groups) – for example, along the lines of the Civil Society Support Room for the Syrian context,⁹ the platform CivilMPlus for Donbas,¹⁰ etc.
- Mandate civil society to monitor peace processes and implementation of peace agreements.
- Prevent conflict parties from acting as mediators.

⁹ United Nations Office of the Special Envoy for Syria, Civil Society Support Room (CSSR). See <https://cssrweb.org/en/>.

¹⁰ The CivilMPlus Platform. See <https://civilmplus.org/en/>.

C. Expand and protect monitoring missions as a crisis response instrument:

- Proactively support monitoring missions in conflict-affected areas. Ensure more frequent strategic use of the Moscow Mechanism when early warning signs emerge. The contributions of monitoring missions and the Moscow Mechanism investigations are essential for enabling early action, combating impunity, and establishing accountability mechanisms.
- Clearly articulate the goals and mandates of each mission to ensure transparency, focus, and coherence in implementation.
- Enhance cooperation with other inter-governmental organisations, including the UN, the EU, and others, to coordinate efforts and increase impact of monitoring missions.
- Increase the number of field staff and ensure their safety and security in all areas.
- Strengthen coordination and collaboration with local civil society actors to enhance contextual understanding and local legitimacy.
- Invest in strategic public communication to clearly explain the mandate and goals of missions and to manage public expectations effectively.

D. Support post-conflict transformation:

- Develop tailored, conflict-specific transformation frameworks that reflect local dynamics and long-term needs.
- Draw on the OSCE's institutional memory and lessons learned, including through resources such as the OSCE Documentation Centre.
- Integrate justice, accountability, and memorialisation work into post-conflict transformation as essential foundations for sustainable peace.
- Invest in care work and trauma healing to support individual and collective healing.
- Ensure protection and support for civil society actors involved in documentation and truth-seeking efforts.

E. Cross-cutting priorities: International law, gender, intersectionality:

- Place respect for international law at the core of all conversations and decisions related to rebuilding the security architecture in the OSCE region.
- Ensure that all programmatic activities within OSCE conflict work integrate a strong human rights focus as a critical part of the conflict cycle.
- Embed gender analysis across all OSCE functions, particularly along the whole conflict cycle.
- Provide dedicated funding to women-led organisations engaged in peacebuilding and human rights advocacy.
- Ensure the safety, recognition, and support of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders.

Recommendations to civil society

- Actively promote the inclusion of civil society in OSCE meetings and activities in the first dimension and advocate for breaking down silos between the three dimensions of comprehensive security. Push for meaningful participation beyond the third dimension.
- Establish sustainable, long-term channels of engagement with relevant OSCE bodies, including the Forum for Security Co-operation, the Conflict Prevention Centre, the Secretariat, the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM).
- Proactively reach out to diverse civil society organisations working on peace and security beyond the traditional human rights community. Foster collaboration, coordination, and mutual learning across regions, borders, and cultural divides.
- Invest in building international solidarity among civil society groups and social movements to strengthen advocacy for comprehensive security, targeting both governments and multilateral organisations.
- Continue efforts to document and archive human rights violations.
- Engage in the collection and transmission of early warning indicators to the Conflict Prevention Centre to support preventive action.
- Take part in narrative-building efforts to promote justice and accountability, and address propaganda and disinformation through strategic communications and public engagement.

Raising OSCE visibility

The OSCE and civil society must work together to improve public awareness of the Organisation's mission and relevance. Through accessible outreach, strategic communication, and inclusive public engagement, they can build a broader base of societal support.

If people across the OSCE region better understand the OSCE's contributions – especially in areas such as human rights protection, conflict prevention, and dialogue facilitation – it will become more difficult, both politically and practically, for the Organization to be sidelined or weakened.

Special efforts should be made to reach and include underrepresented groups – such as women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQ+ communities, and persons with disabilities – who are often disproportionately affected by conflict yet underrepresented in security dialogues.

Outlook: Helsinki+50 as a turning point

The 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act must not be a commemorative ritual but a moment of reckoning. Civil society's role is not auxiliary – it is foundational to a legitimate and sustainable peace.

The OSCE must adapt by systematically embedding civil society in its conflict cycle work and acknowledging that without justice, peace is fragile.

Let this anniversary be a springboard for a renewed OSCE architecture: inclusive, responsive, and rights-based.

Key takeaways

1. Civil society inclusion in OSCE work along the conflict cycle is essential for the Organisation's legitimacy and effectiveness.
2. Human dimension crises must trigger early action.
3. Shrinking civic space is a conflict warning sign.
4. Justice and accountability must anchor post-conflict strategies.
5. Gender analysis is a security imperative, not an add-on.
6. OSCE visibility must improve to strengthen public understanding and support.