



Climate Justice and the OSCE: The Urgent Need to Support Civil Society for Successful Environmental and Climate Action

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Summary

From inception, the Helsinki Accords have included environmental considerations as fundamental priorities. The Helsinki Final Act stated, “...efforts to develop co-operation in the fields of trade, industry, science and technology, the environment and other areas of economic activity contribute to the reinforcement of peace and security in Europe, and in the world as a whole.”² In 2003, in Maastricht, the OSCE committed itself to “co-operate on economic, good governance, sustainable development and environmental protection issues in order to tackle the threats and challenges to security that had emerged over the previous decade.”³ This recognition of the growth in security challenges is part of an important dynamic within the OSCE, and similar changes have continued over time. Most recently, in 2021, with the MC decision 3/21 to cooperate more closely on challenges caused by climate change, the OSCE has made an even more significant commitment to addressing climate change, and this is a key departure from previous focus on environment and economy as the key factors of the second dimension. Point 9 of this decision, “[e]ncourages the participating States to pursue a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling climate change by actively engaging the private sector, academia, civil society and all other relevant stakeholders, including women’s and youth organizations.”⁴ Developing a focus relating environment and economics to one that more fully embraces the complexity of environmental security is encouraging. It is an appropriate response to the ever growing threat of climate change, and the increasing intersectional nature of environmental security. Civil society must be an even more integral part of this equation moving forward. To achieve successful climate goals, the next step in the OSCE’s development of its environmental goals must be to fully incorporate civil society into the second dimension, understanding and working to protect the rights of environmental, climate, and human rights defenders working on issues related to climate and environment. It will require the full engagement of civil society, particularly environmental and climate defenders and independent journalists, to achieve this goal.

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² “Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Factsheet, OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension,” <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/2/30348.pdf>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Decision No. 3/21 “Strengthening Cooperation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change,” <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/f/507050.pdf>

Key Environmental Decisions within the Framework of the OSCE

From the beginning, environment has been a critical element of the OSCE framework. It has developed over time; a brief summary of the key decisions is noted here.

In **1975**, when the Helsinki Final Act was signed, environment and economy were recognized as important pillars of security, and grouped in the “second basket.” They were seen as key to security in the OSCE region, and the emphasis in the language at the time was on industry, trade, and science and technology.⁵

In **1992**, at the Helsinki Summit, participating States spelled out key environmental concerns for cooperation.⁶ Much of the focus for this document—in keeping with the times—was on public education about nuclear energy and weapons, and hazardous waste.

In **1997**, the participating States of the OSCE agreed to create a position of coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities within the OSCE Secretariat. This position is under the direct supervision of the Secretary General and the “overarching objective of the Office... is to strengthen security and stability in the OSCE region by promoting international co-operation on economic and environmental issues.”⁷ Many of the environmental activities carried under the auspices of the OSCE are through this body.

At the **2003** Ministerial Council meeting in Maastricht, participating States adopted the OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension.⁸ This decision was based on the recognition by participating States that environmental degradation and unsustainable use of natural resources and mismanagement and poor decision-making had a significant impact on the health, welfare, and well-being of countries in the OSCE region, and that changes needed to be made.

In **2007**, the Madrid Declaration mentioned climate change specifically, calling it “a long-term challenge.”⁹ The Chernobyl disaster was mentioned again, and strong references were made to the need for transboundary cooperation. There was no mention of civil society.

The **2013** Kyiv Declaration focused on improving the environmental footprint of energy-related activities in the OSCE region.¹⁰ The document mentioned climate change once, and discussed opportunities for renewable and sustainable energy, reducing emissions, focusing on the transboundary nature of energy production and use, and highlighted the key role that civil society plays in a multi-stakeholder approach to addressing this complex issue.

⁵ “Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Factsheet, OSCE Economic and Environmental Dimension,” <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/4/2/30348.pdf>

⁶ “CSCE Helsinki Document, The Challenges of Change,” July 9-10, 1992, pp. 32-33, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/c/39530.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Madrid Declaration on Environment and Security, November 30, 2007, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/b/a/29550.pdf>

¹⁰ Decision No. 5/13 “Improving the Environmental Footprint of Energy-Related Activities in the OSCE Region,” December 6, 2013, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/e/109342.pdf>

The Decision No. 6/14 Enhancing Disaster Risk Reduction, was taken on December 4, **2014**, in Basel, Switzerland, recognized the role of climate change in the increase in disasters in the OSCE region,¹¹ and pushed for a multi-stakeholder approach to preparedness, mitigation, and adaptation, highlighting the importance of civil society engagement. This included the involvement of OSCE Aarhus Centers, field operations, civil society organizations, and others.

In December **2021**, the Ministerial Council adopted Decision 3/21, which specifically addresses the issue of climate change and concerns for the region.¹² The document recognizes that climate change is a global challenge, and specifically identifies climate change as a risk to security in the OSCE. Encouraging participating States to “voluntarily implement the provisions of this decision,”¹³ the document is the most far-reaching and definitive statement on climate change and the connected security risks to date by the OSCE.

The OSCE’s development over the past fifty years of its definition and incorporation of environmental issues and climate change into the mandate of the institution is significant. Understanding of the intersectional nature of the climate issue is clear in the documents and programs created by the OSCE.

The OSCE developed Aarhus Centers in numerous parts of the region, including in Central Asia—an area hard-hit by climate change. These centers can play an important role, but increasing and strengthening the role of civil society in the work of these centers is critically important. And it is here that the third dimension becomes a critical element of the needed reassessment of the second dimension, because without vibrant civil society and space for this critical activity, the centers cannot fulfill their potential.

From its Aarhus Centers to its programs addressing migration, gender, conflict, transboundary concerns, environmental degradation, and energy security (and this is not a comprehensive list), the OSCE has worked to incorporate environment and climate into its mandate.

What remains is to fully recognize the critical role of civil society and the intersection with the human dimension and incorporate civil society engagement into decision-making. As defenders are under attack throughout the OSCE region, there is a tremendously important role for the institution to play in protecting defenders and in articulating the key nature of our role in the climate crisis. The interdimensional nature of the crisis requires it—whether in solving issues related to migration, conflict, environmental degradation, gender, food security, or the myriad other elements impacted by the climate crisis, civil society must play a key role if we are to have successful outcomes.

Shrinking Civic Space

Civil society has been shrinking in the OSCE region for the past decade. Punitive legislation (foreign agent and undesirable organizations laws), repression of free speech, growing physical threats to defenders, and the rise of authoritarianism throughout the region have a destructive effect on civil society. The rise of right-wing governments in Eastern and Western Europe, the United States, and

¹¹ Decision No. 6/14 “Enhancing Disaster Risk Reduction,” December 5, 2014, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/6/130406.pdf>

¹² Decision No. 3/21 “Strengthening Cooperation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change,” December 3, 2021

¹³ Ibid.

throughout the countries of Eurasia is stifling civic space, and requires that international institutions speak up more loudly than before in defense of those activists, journalists, and defenders who are under pressure from their governments. This includes environmental and climate activists.

According to a report published in February 2024 by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Environment, Michel Forst, environmental activists are increasingly portrayed in a negative light in the media in Europe.¹⁴ They are also subject to legislative restrictions equating them to terrorists. Police brutality is on the rise in contact with environmental protesters in numerous European countries.¹⁵ Similar findings have been documented in the United States.¹⁶ SLAPP suits, harassment, and violence are among the most common reprisals suffered in the US.

In Eurasia, the most recent crackdown (although not the only) is occurring in Azerbaijan. Host to the UNFCCC COP29 in November 2024, virtually every independent environmental defender or environmental journalist in the country was imprisoned or under house arrest. In the lead up to COP29, Azerbaijani authorities instituted a massive crackdown on civil society, violently arresting activists, scholars, and journalists. Over 300 political prisoners¹⁷ were detained by the regime in the lead up to COP, and the regime extended the pre-trial detention of one activists—Anar Mammadli¹⁸—while the COP was in session. Dr. Gubad Ibadoghlu, the leading voice holding accountable the regime for its oil and gas extraction and production, was confined to house arrest after 10 months in a pre-trial detention facility. Denied access to critically needed medication, his health is a serious concern.¹⁹ Journalists who covered an environmental disaster at a gold mine in western Azerbaijan are also held in pre-trial detention, abused and mistreated, and denied access to family and medical care.²⁰

Environmental defenders have also been subject to brutal treatment in Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan, where they have been driven underground because of repressive NGO legislation. Scientists and academics have not escaped persecution, and the situation for journalists covering environmental stories—especially those connected to corruption and power—has grown increasingly grim.

The concurrent threats of climate and environmental insecurity and growing authoritarianism and the accompanying shrinkage of civic space require a robust and re-imagined approach to security in the OSCE region, which is impossible to achieve without the full involvement of civil society.

It is imperative that the OSCE participating States address this unprecedented threat with a new, creative, and committed approach—one that include civil society in all its aspects: academics, independent scientists, independent media, and civic activists and organizations.

¹⁴ https://unece.org/sites/default/files/2024-02/UNSR_EnvDefenders_Aarhus_Position_Paper_Civil_Disobedience_EN.pdf, p. 9.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 10-11.

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nsZ3k58RsdC> and “Dangerous Work: Reprisals Against Environmental Defenders, Crude Accountability, 2019, https://crudeaccountability.org/wp-content/uploads/Report_DangerousWork_compressed_for_web.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.1lurer.am/en/2024/09/23/Number-of-Political-Prisoners-in-Azerbaijan-Reaches-319-Human-Rights-Activists/1192290>

¹⁸ <https://www.irfs.org/news-feed/term-of-arrest-of-anar-mammadli-extended-for-another-3-months/>

¹⁹ <https://freegubad.com/>

²⁰ <https://abzas.org/en/>

Recommendations

To address the climate crisis more fully and successfully, and to provide additional necessary support to civil society, the following recommendations are offered:

- Building on existing commitments, the OSCE should broaden its concept of environmental security and the climate crisis to highlight and better incorporate into its activities and programming the intersectional and interdimensional nature of the issue, including impacts on migration, gender, minorities, indigenous rights, conflict, and transboundary issues. This would put environmental security and the climate crisis much higher on the OSCE agenda, substantially activating work in this field; and supporting these efforts by providing the necessary resources.
- The OSCE should establish the position of Rapporteur on Security of Environmental and Climate Defenders or include this problem in the mandate of the CiO Special Representative on Civil Society. For its part, ODIHR should include the situation of environmental and climate defenders in its monitoring of and reporting on security of human rights defenders. Much as the United Nations has expanded its human rights mandate to include environment and climate change specifically, the OSCE should broaden its second and third dimension mandates to include the protection of environmental and climate defenders.
- OSCE participating States should create an informal “friends of the environment” working group to engage with civil society and community members focused on environmental and climate issues.
- Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities within the OSCE Secretariat and OSCE field operations should be activated in more substantial ways to engage civil society and local communities. This engagement should utilize the resources of the Aarhus Center Network with its more than 30 centers in all four OSCE sub-regions. Civil society groups and local community members are invaluable sources of data on climate related issues including emissions, resource use, and regional solutions. Civil society should be much more vigorously included in OSCE work on environmental security and climate change to ensure that climate and environmental policy and programs of the OSCE and its participating States help the people and communities that most need support.
- Relevant OSCE bodies, such as the Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities within the OSCE Secretariat, the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, and the Economic and Environmental Committee should create more opportunities for input from civil society, invite civil society experts and members of affected communities to speak at their meetings, include their representatives in monitoring, reporting, analysis, deliberations and program development, implementation and assessment.