HELSINKI+50 REFLECTION PROCESS OUTCOME DOCUMENT

TEN POINTS FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE

July 2025

Helsinki+50 initiative towards the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act:
Reflection process on the future of the OSCE in the times of crises

Implemented by the Civic Solidarity Platform

Helsinki+50 Reflection Process Outcome Document: Ten Points for the Present and Future

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About the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process

Several years ago, against the background of challenges the OSCE faced in addressing the deepening regional security crisis, anti-democratic backsliding, and growing repression in a number of participating States as well as an internal organisational crisis, members of the OSCE-wide civil society network, the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP), put forward an idea to organise a process to discuss the role of the OSCE in the changing world and to develop proposals to make the Organisation better suited to address the multifaceted crisis and respond to new challenges. It was agreed that the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Helsinki Final Act would provide a good opportunity to present such analysis and recommendations. Discussions of the initiative resulted in the organisation in the summer 2024 of the project "Helsinki+50 Reflection Process", coordinated by the CSP with support of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany, and the Mission of the Netherlands to the OSCE.

The project goal was to analyse the main challenges to implementing the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments by participating States 50 years after the signing of the Final Act, the work of OSCE bodies, autonomous institutions and programmes, and civil society's engagement in the context of several interconnected international crises, the institutional crisis of the Organisation, and the evolving geopolitical environment, and develop a set of recommendations on changes in several key areas. Towards this goal, a "Helsinki+50 Reflection Group" was set up, comprising 32 experts from civil society organisations and academic institutions, as well as several former OSCE officials and former diplomats. Several thematic areas for analysis in the course of five in-person expert seminars and online communications were identified.

The seminars brought together experts from both the Reflection Group and outside of it, and provided a platform for open discussions and elaboration of recommendations for a way forward. The following seminars were held: "Civil society's role in the implementation of the Helsinki principles. Expanding civil society's engagement with the OSCE" (Warsaw, 29 September 2024); "Environmental security and the OSCE" (Helsinki, 5 November 2024, in partnership with Historians without Borders, Finland); "Political-military security dimension of the Helsinki process: Roles of the OSCE and civil society" (Vienna, 25 February 2025); "Civil society role in addressing security concerns: Reflecting on the engagement with the OSCE and beyond in the evolving security situation" (Berlin, 28 April 2025); "Reclaiming and reshaping civil society space for action on comprehensive security in the new and evolving geopolitical environment" (Vienna, 3 May 2025).

Experts from more than 60 civil society organisations, think-tanks, and academic institutions from across the OSCE region took part in the seminars, including Araminta (Germany), Austausch e.V. (Germany), Austrian Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Austrian Helsinki Association, Austrian Institute of International Affairs, Bir Duino (Kyrgyzstan), Berghof Foundation (Germany), Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Center for Civil Liberties (Ukraine), Centre for Democratic Integrity (Austria), Center for European Policy Analysis (U.S.), Center for Solidarity International (Lithuania), Comenius University (Slovakia), Crisis Management Centre (Finland), CRISP – Crisis Simulation for Peace e. V. (Germany), Crude Accountability (USA), Dialogue Office for Civil Society Cooperation (Austria), Environmental Crisis Group (Russia/the Netherlands), European Exchange (Germany), FIDH – International Federation for Human Rights (international), Finnish Institute for International Affairs, Freedom Files (Poland), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Vienna Office (Germany/ Austria), Geneva Centre for Security Policy (Switzerland), George Washington University (USA), Global Public Policy Institute (Germany), Helsinki Citizens Assembly – Vanadzor (Armenia), Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia (Serbia),

Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights (Poland), Historians without Borders (Finland), Human Rights Defence Centre "Memorial" (Russia/international), Human Rights Watch (U.S.A./international), International Partnership for Human Rights (Belgium/international), International Strategic Action Network for Security – iSANS (Poland), Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law , KIT Royal Tropical Institute (the Netherlands), Libereco (the Netherlands/Germany/Switzerland), Little Earth (Tajikistan), Movement of Social Democracy (Georgia), Moscow Helsinki Group (Russia), Netherlands Helsinki Committee, New Eurasian Strategies Centre (UK), Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Promo-LEX (Moldova), Public Verdict Foundation (Russia), Safer Climate (Finland), School of Civic Education (Lithuania/Latvia/Russia), Sicherheit Neu Denken – "Rethinking Security – from Military to Civil Security Policy" (Germany), Snowchange Cooperative (Finland), Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (Germany), Swiss Helsinki Committee, Swisspeace (Switzerland), Truth Hounds (Ukraine), Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union, University of Helsinki (Finland), University of Turku (Finland), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Germany), World Wide Fund for Nature (Finland), and several independent activists, experts, and former OSCE officials, and former diplomats.

Representatives of the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media participated as speakers. A representative of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland participated as an observer. Members of the Reflection Group, who participated in online discussions, represented the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, Human Rights Center of Azerbaijan, Human Rights Center "Viasna" (Belarus), IDP Women Association "Consent" (Georgia), and Swedish OSCE Network.

Reports on the proceedings of the five seminars were produced.[1] They present an overview of expert remarks, discussions, and recommendations to OSCE bodies and institutions, participating States, and civil society. Thirteen papers on selected key themes were produced by the project experts.[2]

At the final stage of the Reflection Process, a Civil Society Manifesto on the 50th Anniversary of the Final Helsinki Act was developed, presenting civil society's key appeals on what states must do to fully realise the Helsinki principles and implement OSCE commitments, what OSCE structures should do to effectively fulfil their mandates, and what civil society commits to do to realise the Helsinki principles in all three dimensions.

This outcome document represents a summary of the main findings and recommendations of the Reflection Process.

We hope that discussion of the results of the Reflection Process will contribute to recommitment by participating States to the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments, strengthening of their realisation, making the OSCE more capable of effectively responding to the current crises and new challenges, assisting in ensuring a more prominent role of civil society in the Helsinki process, and generating broader public support and engagement.

[1] See reports from seminars at https://civicsolidarity.org/article/helsinki-50-reflection-process/.

[2] See expert papers at https://civicsolidarity.org/article/civil-society-engagement-with-the-osce-insights-from-the-helsinki-50-expert-seminars/.

1. Starting with recognising that the OSCE is in crisis and searching for ways of restoring respect for the OSCE acquis

1.1. In order to reignite a new spirit in the Helsinki process and make the OSCE capable of responding to the current crises and new challenges, we should start by recognising that the OSCE is in crisis due to several key factors:

- its inability to play an important role in preventing and stopping the largest war in Europe since World War II – Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine;
- deteriorating implementation by participating States of their OSCE commitments in all three dimensions, accompanied by impunity and a lack of accountability for systematic or gross violations;
- compartmentalisation of the three dimensions, undermining the comprehensive security concept;
- the organisation's failure to effectively engage in addressing new and emerging challenges to comprehensive security such as climate crisis, the impacts and causes of migration, backlash against gender equality and gender identity, the use of hybrid non-military tools, etc., and essentially leaving it to other stakeholders to address these challenges;
- failure to fully utilise the potential of civil society to serve as a key actor in upholding the Helsinki principles, often limiting OSCE engagement with civil society to a symbolic level;
- lack of awareness among members of the general public of participating States of the Helsinki principles and the OSCE work, limiting popular demand for implementing the OSCE acquis;
- abuse of the consensus principle by a minority of states, which are among the worst violators of the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments, which limits effective decision-making and contributes to chronic underfunding of the Organisation, while extra-budgetary contributions remain very insufficient.

1.2. These problems require urgent attention by all who want the OSCE to address multiple international crises and its own institutional challenges.

Recommendations

1.3. The OSCE must act as both a guardian of the Helsinki principles and a forum for dialogue. It should reinforce existing commitments, strengthen its institutions, and be open to civic scrutiny and participation.

1.4. Respect for the OSCE acquis can only be ensured through a combination of political commitment of participating States to abide by the Helsinki principles, increased political and financial support for OSCE autonomous institutions as key actors in monitoring implementation of commitments and assisting States in their implementation, more active and creative use of mandates of executive bodies and institutions and various OSCE tools not requiring approval by consensus, ensuring accountability of States for violations, civil society vigilance, meaningful engagement with civil society by OSCE bodies and participating States, and reaching out to members of societies by all concerned actors to generate broad public support to, engagement in, and ownership of the Helsinki process.

1.5. To safeguard the very principle of cooperative security against mounting pressure, a strategic and intelligent refocusing of the OSCE and prioritising of its programmatic activities are essential. This implies concentrating on core issues and giving up on less essential activities. The core of these efforts

must be the establishment of a robust and open platform for dialogue and negotiation that enables participating States to better navigate and reconcile highly divergent political positions but at the same time maintaining essential elements of the Helsinki principles. OSCE bodies and participating States must reflect on what should be preserved and strengthened, what should be removed or fundamentally altered, and what should be developed instead.

1.6. Ensuring respect for the OSCE acquis is impossible without securing accountability of participating States for the failure to uphold the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments in practice. Respect for the OSCE acquis has been seriously eroded in the last decade and a half when a number of participating States have been openly and systematically violating their OSCE commitments in all three dimensions. The 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act could provide impetus for a renewed emphasis by participating States and civil society on accountability of states for upholding the Helsinki principles and their OSCE commitments.

1.7. This can include the frank recognition that no state is perfect, there will always be some gaps and shortfalls, combined with agreement that all must strive in good faith to improve their own implementation and to assist each other – with support of OSCE structures and civil society – in overcoming any challenges.

1.8. This could also include introduction of more systematic and structured procedures of review of the implementation of OSCE commitments by States as well as taking more consistent follow-up steps by OSCE bodies and participating States after review meetings, release of reports by OSCE bodies, release of reports in the framework of the human dimension mechanisms, holding of conferences, etc.

1.9. This should also include more systematic inclusion of the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments not only in the legislation and domestic policies of participating States, ensuring their own respect and better implementation, but also their stronger incorporation in foreign policies of participating States, aimed at ensuring better respect and implementation by other States. This understanding should be embraced not only by delegations of States in Vienna but also by the capitals.

1.10. The work of different structures of the OSCE can and should be politically and financially supported based on their existing mandates to assist participating States in their implementation of commitments, for example, by providing training, facilitating the sharing of good practices, and developing guidelines and recommendations.

1.11. Importantly, respect for the OSCE acquis should be based not only on the implementation of the Helsinki principles and OSCE commitments by participating States but also on the scrutiny by civil society and popular demand by citizens. It is the public demand "from below" and monitoring and expertise by civic groups that may lead to better implementation of the OSCE acquis by governments – as it was pursued, often successfully, by the civic Helsinki movement in the 1970s-1980s.

1.12 Beyond this, non-state bodies can play a more important role by applying comprehensive security standards and approaches in their sphere of influence at the local, regional and national level as well as across borders and in international coalitions and networks. This should be done by what is usually called civil society, but also by bodies that in many countries have a more formal role, such as associations of legal professionals, academic institutions, trade unions, religious bodies, etc.

2. Upholding respect of the Helsinki principles in the changing world

2.1 Civil society actors believe in the high importance and the continued relevance of the Helsinki principles and the comprehensive security concept. The importance of multilateralism and the unique place the OSCE provides for civil society are as essential today as 50 years ago.

2.2 OSCE bodies, institutions, participating States and civil society should work together to uphold this conceptual framework and develop new instruments that would allow the Helsinki concept to effectively work at the time when many States are not like-minded anymore.

2.3 Upholding these principles and OSCE commitments must involve systematic documentation of violations, support for accountability mechanisms, and investment in civic infrastructure that can help hold states to account, especially in times of crisis.

2.4 A lack of enforcement and accountability mechanisms for violation of OSCE commitments is the biggest challenge to the effective implementation of the Helsinki principles. When a state blatantly violates the key Helsinki principles it should face international accountability. This is key to making these principles work at the time when states disagree and when there is a lack of trust.

2.5 Abuse of the consensus principle by a minority of States who often are the worst violators of the Helsinki principles limits effective decision-making in the Organisation and contributes to its chronic underfunding.

2.6 Members of the Civic Solidarity Platform and participants of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process are particularly troubled by the OSCE's failure to fully utilise civil society's potential to serve as a key actor in upholding the Helsinki principles, often limiting engagement with civil society to a symbolic level.

2.7 The general public lacks awareness of the Helsinki principles and OSCE work, limiting popular demand for implementing the OSCE acquis.

Recommendations

2.8 These problems require urgent attention by all who want the OSCE to address multiple international crises and its own institutional challenges. The OSCE must act as both a guardian of the Helsinki principles and a forum for dialogue. It should reinforce existing commitments, strengthen its institutions, and be open to civic scrutiny and participation.

2.9 OSCE participating States should reaffirm that the key Helsinki principles of sovereign equality, refraining from the use of force, the inviolability of borders, guarantees for sovereignty of states, respect for the concept of comprehensive security, respect of the notion that implementation of human dimension commitments "are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned" are non-negotiable and should remain at the centre of the European security order. Any disputes between states should be settled peacefully. Above all, Russia must immediately end its war of aggression against Ukraine.

2.10 OSCE structures and concerned participating States should establish effective communication with state actors committed to the Helsinki principles, other intergovernmental organisations, and civil society to create informal coalitions working to promote and implement the Helsinki principles.

2.11 Participating States and OSCE structures should address the problem of the lack of enforcement and accountability mechanisms for violation of OSCE commitments. While bringing violators to account is impossible in the OSCE framework, States should use findings and conclusions of OSCE monitoring missions and Moscow Mechanism reports more actively as a basis for actions outside the OSCE, including for ensuring accountability in international judicial bodies.

2.12 Continued efforts to maintain the relevance of the OSCE framework can only be credible when participating States apply principles of justice, fairness, peaceful coexistence and accountability worldwide. Unequivocal support is required for efforts to move the UN away from the dominance of World War II allied victors, to reform the international financial system, to strengthen the UN human rights system, the International Court of Justice, and the International Criminal Court.

2.13 OSCE structures should be encouraged and empowered to fully exercise their existing mandates across all three dimensions on matters where no new consensus decisions are needed – ODIHR to proactively engage with states regarding their human dimension problems and more vigorously address closing civil society space, RFoM to proactively address the issue of propaganda and disinformation, concentration of the media ownership, and the problems related to privately owned social media platforms, HCNM to counter the instrumentalization of ethnic origin in national politics and across borders, CPC to truly open up to civil society input, etc. – and making full use of knowledge, expertise, and capacities of civil society and cooperation with other relevant actors.

2.14 Another practical way to use the OSCE toolbox more effectively is for groups of participating States to employ existing non-consensus mechanisms such as the Vienna and the Moscow mechanisms more consistently and take follow-up steps after the release of the reports to work on implementing their recommendations. If such steps are impossible in the OSCE framework, they should be undertaken in other multilateral settings or in bilateral relations.

2.15 An important element of making the OSCE more effective in the absence of consensus on increasing the unified budget would be for those with sufficient capacity to increase voluntary contributions of financial and human resources (extrabudgetary contributions and secondments). The OSCE is so small in relation to other international organisations that very modest increases by major contributors would greatly increase the OSCE's capacity to act effectively.

2.16 Participating States should make further efforts to ensure continuity between Chairpersonships by seconding expert staff to CiOs for longer assignments. OSCE structures, including Secretariat and institutions, should have sufficient resources to support CiO on all substantive issues.

2.17 CiOs should make better use of the Troika format and consultations with OSCE bodies and civil society to make sure they are ready to work effectively from the very beginning of each year.

2.18 OSCE success should be based on respect, support and ownership of the Helsinki principles and the Helsinki process by members of the general public. To increase respect for OSCE acquis, the OSCE needs to develop transparent communication to members of the public and its increased visibility to raise awareness of the OSCE work, its aims and successes among citizens of participating States. This should include fostering a better understanding of OSCE relevance, including the notion that comprehensive security based on the Helsinki principles goes beyond the absence of violent conflicts but includes ensuring human security – strengthening democracy, the rule of law, protecting human rights, and promoting social, environmental and economic stability now and for the next generations.

3. Effectively realising the comprehensive security concept

3.1 Participants of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process recognised the enduring value of the Helsinki Decalogue and efforts by the OSCE, in its norms and its programmes, to deal with security comprehensively. Addressing the human as well as economic and environmental dimensions of security together with politico-military issues has been a critical contribution of the Helsinki process.

3.2 The notion of comprehensive security, with its human dimension at the forefront, is just as vital today as it was in 1975 when the Helsinki Final Act was signed. Then, it represented a visionary reframing of security – not limited to military balance or geopolitical calculations, but expanded to include respect for human rights, democratic governance, and rule of law as core components of peace and stability. This multidimensional understanding was revolutionary for its time and has only grown in relevance amid today's geopolitical breakdowns, authoritarian resurgence, and global instability.

3.3 The collapse of the post-Cold War security order, Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine, and the erosion of democratic norms across the OSCE region make it painfully clear that security cannot be achieved through force or statecraft alone. As highlighted in interventions during the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process seminars, the link between domestic repression and external aggression has become undeniable. The rise of authoritarian regimes, shrinking civic space, and normalisation of propaganda and violence show that ignoring the human dimension of security leads not to order, but to catastrophe. Participants in the Helsinki+50 repeatedly emphasised that sustainable security must rest on inclusive governance, protection of civic actors, and mechanisms for accountability and trust-building. This is not only a normative imperative – it is a pragmatic necessity in a world where societal resilience and public engagement are critical to responding to crises, preventing conflict, and rebuilding peace.

3.4 Today's challenges – war, disinformation, climate collapse, displacement of people – cut across borders and require a reimagined security paradigm. As expressed in the Helsinki+50 seminars and civil society interventions, comprehensive security must be reclaimed and reshaped for the current era. That means re-centering the OSCE and similar forums around their original purpose: to serve as platforms for dialogue, rights, and cooperation across divides.

3.5 Helsinki+50 Reflection Process participants highlighted major problems impeding effective realisation of the OSCE's comprehensive security concept. Most fundamentally, a number of participating States fail to implement their OSCE commitments across all three dimensions. Russia has grossly violated virtually all the Helsinki principles, most brazenly by launching its full-scale aggression against Ukraine. But many other states regularly violate many human dimension commitments – on human rights and fundamental freedoms, democratic governance, the rule of law, tolerance and non-discrimination – as well as second dimension commitments to combat corruption and protect the environment. States frequently seek to justify violations or limitations of human rights by citing broad "security" concerns or references to terrorism and extremism, rather than acknowledging that repression, arbitrariness, corruption and poor environmental policies constitute threats to security and stability.

3.6 OSCE documents usefully emphasise the comprehensive nature of security, but the OSCE's complex and decentralised structure leads to a compartmentalised approach which does not always contribute in practice to addressing security issues comprehensively. While some specialisation is desirable and independence of OSCE institutions is essential, the Reflection Process participants frequently observed that the work of OSCE Secretariat structures and field operations in the politico-military dimension could

be more transparent and should more clearly integrate human dimension considerations. While there are many good practices, such as training law enforcement officials to respect human rights and non-discrimination principles in combating hate crime, much greater effort is needed to address such matters systematically.

Recommendations

3.7 OSCE structures and participating States should institutionalise a cross-dimensional approach in all OSCE activities to ensure practical implementation of the comprehensive security concept and make consistent efforts to overcome the existing compartmentalisation of the three dimensions.

3.8 Work on politico-military security issues, including on-going programmatic activities and any potential future efforts related to mediation or ceasefire monitoring, should be designed and implemented in consultation with, and with participation of, experts in the human and economic / environmental dimensions of security from both within and outside the OSCE.

3.9 Participating States and OSCE structures should always take gender aspects of politico-military issues fully into account, consistent with the OSCE's own strategy on the promotion of gender equality and with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

3.10 Given the increasing use of hybrid practices to undermine stability and security, including through propaganda, disinformation, and election interference, OSCE participating States and OSCE structures, including Representative on Freedom of the Media and ODIHR, should further develop their own toolbox and develop necessary co-operative responses to address these threats comprehensively, consistent with the full range of OSCE principles and commitments.

4. Addressing conflicts and concerns in the politico-military security dimension: The role of OSCE structures and participating States

4.1 Participants of the Reflection Process recognised the contribution of the Helsinki Final Act and subsequent OSCE commitments to promoting greater stability and providing the agreed Principles that should continue to guide participating States in their politico-military dimension activities. Even in the current unstable environment, dominated by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, OSCE bodies such as the Forum for Security Co-operation may contribute to limited transparency and "dialogue" on politico-military issues. Some practical activities of the Conflict Prevention Centre and field operations play a positive role, particularly through exchanges of military information to reduce risks and practical post-conflict programming in the Western Balkans. First dimension and cross-dimensional activities that address trafficking in human beings, strengthen human rights-compliant policing, and approach border security with respect for human rights make positive contributions.

4.2 Unfortunately, practical OSCE efforts to address the initial phases of the Russian aggression against Ukraine, including through various mediation formats and the work of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, played only a limited positive role. And neither the commitment of participating States to the Helsinki Principles nor practical OSCE efforts were able to prevent the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, leading to alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity. Similarly, while OSCE efforts to resolve protracted conflicts in Moldova and the South Caucasus have at times played stabilising roles, these have not yielded sustainable results and did not prevent the use of force by Russia against Georgia in 2008 or by Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, leading to civilian casualties, enforced disappearances, ethnic cleansing, and massive displacement of population.

4.3 Participants of the Reflection Process thus found work of OSCE structures and dialogue forums largely ineffective in promoting peace and stability among participating States, particularly in recent years. They recognised that shortcomings and failures should not be attributed to weaknesses in the OSCE *acquis* or to international civil servants and diplomats, but rather to the policies of participating States and their unwillingness to find peaceful solutions to political or territorial disputes.

4.4 In contrast to the situation regarding OSCE human dimension meetings, there is no formal mandate for OSCE politico-military forums and structures to be open to civil society. Non-governmental actors are often excluded from such OSCE forums or included very selectively, with invitations often limited to academic and think-tank experts rather than civil society actors.

4.5 Since MC Decision 3/11, the OSCE bodies mandated to work on conflicts, including the Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) and its work with early warning indicators, and field operations, have made considerable progress in developing various instruments, toolboxes, trainings, and guidelines to make the OSCE's work along the conflict cycle more effective. There is an array of different bodies and processes in the OSCE dealing with these issues; however, their impact on actions and policies of participating States has been very limited. The OSCE and its executive bodies cannot make full use of their mandates and capacities due to a lack of political will of participating States to make proactive use of relevant instruments and a constant decrease of the organisation's unified budget, which constraints its ability to respond to emerging tensions and address root causes of conflicts. The biggest problem with the OSCE security/conflict cycle toolbox is that participating States do not use it in earnest. Even if diplomats in Vienna are aware of the toolbox and see its value, decision-makers in the capitals do not apply it. When there is lack of political will and when states do not want to cooperate with OSCE bodies and utilise instruments from the toolbox, these instruments become useless.

4.6 The CPC's Situation/Communication room has a key early warning relevance for monitoring developments in all 57 participating States, giving regular updates to the Chair, the Secretary General, and senior management. However, the CPS personnel and budget are insufficient and do not ensure that it disposes of analytical capacities to cover relevant developments throughout the OSCE area. The CPC established a Mediation Support Team as an OSCE-wide focal point for dialogue facilitation and mediation support. It lacks resources to cover the current demands for its work and on assisting field missions for enhancing peace and stability over the long term.

4.7 While field operations serve as a key tool in OSCE conflict work, they are often understaffed, some of them lack a clear mandate on conflict work, experience pressure from host governments, and do not effectively interact with independent civil society. Moreover, field operations are not present in many participating States, falling victim to positions of participating States involved in conflicts which take advantage of the consensus rule and block extension of field operations' mandates, their budgets and staff capacities. A monitoring mission such as the SMM cannot be effective when conflict parties impose restrictions on its operations and prevent effective fulfilment of its mandate.

4.8 Dealing with conflicts in the OSCE is increasingly driven by the desire to overcome growing divisions among participating States and engage political leaders on both sides of the divide in dialogue. As a result, the focus on conflict management is more than ever narrowed down to mediation among political leaders rather than participation of a broad range of actors to address the root causes of conflicts. Such "engagement at any cost" makes all parties involved hostages of political bargaining and focuses on "negative peace" to the detriment of building durable "positive peace". Conflict resolution efforts at Track-2 and Track-3 facilitated by OSCE field operations are a positive example of a more comprehensive and inclusive approach and should be supported and scaled up.

4.9 Propaganda, disinformation and hate speech have a serious negative impact on the security and sovereignty of states. They are also a big detrimental factor for freedom of the media by undermining credibility of the media and often being accompanied by wiping out independent media by the authorities to make propaganda work more successfully.

Recommendations

4.10 The current challenging situation requires reconceptualising the OSCE's role in the security field. In their discussions on re-building security architecture in the OSCE region, OSCE structures and participating States should formulate more clearly what really the nature of the OSCE work in conflict resolution, peace building, and more broadly in the security field should be, what its main value in the current challenging context is, and prioritise the identified goals and activities.

4.11 They should also discuss involvement of different international and national actors in efforts to rebuild security architecture in the OSCE region and consider OSCE's coordinating and monitoring role in this process. The OSCE can play an important role as a platform of negotiating, implementing or controlling implementation of agreements achieved elsewhere. This might be the most practical way forward for making the Organisation relevant in the new security situation.

4.12 OSCE structures and participating States should consider different scenarios of the OSCE future, reflecting on experiences of what the OSCE was able to achieve in different periods in the past and depending on geopolitical developments, first and foremost on how the full-scale invasion of Ukraine will end and on how relations between Russia and the West will develop; acknowledge that the OSCE

has a role to play in the future even in the worst case scenario; be prepared to different scenarios and have concrete plans for their implementation.

4.13 OSCE structures should ensure that future engagements apply the comprehensive security concept (see Chapter 3) and should recognise human dimension crises, including the shrinking of civic space, as security threats.

4.14 Participating States and OSCE structures should place respect for international law at the core of all conversations and decisions related to re-building security architecture in the OSCE region, including the Helsinki principles and the UN charter norms on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, prohibition of the use of force or threat thereof, the concept of comprehensive security, respect for norms of international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

4.15 Participating States and OSCE structures should ensure that all programmatic activities within OSCE conflict work integrate a strong human rights focus as a critical part of the conflict cycle. This requirement should be implemented in the work on different conflict situations, including the Transnistrian region of Moldova, Georgia, and Nagorno Karabakh.

4.16 The ODIHR needs to have better rapid response/standby capacity in order to deal with emergencies and crisis situations, such as for sending human dimension assessment missions. This includes relevant budgets for rapid response that could be used throughout the year.

4.17 A stronger leadership role of the Chairpersonship is required when the first warning signs of a conflict and/or an unfolding human dimension crisis are detected. The Chairpersonship must make active use of the CPC's early warning functions, supporting the Secretary General and the CPC to carry out their early warning mandate. In cases when the political-military security dimension or the human dimension situation deteriorates and access to the country is limited or absent, a Chairpersonship action should be taken, including in the form of a Chairpersonship-commissioned report.

4.18 The Secretary General (SG) should more effectively use his/her mandate for early warning action on the basis of the MC Decision 3/11, including by making more regular early warning reports to the Permanent Council to enable participating States to engage early on emerging trends. Early warning by the SG should be implemented in a way that keeps the door open for constructive engagement.

4.19 Participating States and OSCE structures should also strengthen responses to hybrid non-military security threats, addressing instruments such as propaganda and disinformation, cyberattacks, and artificially induced migration crises at borders more actively. States that are targeted by such hybrid instruments should consider invoking the Moscow Mechanism in respect of the situation in their countries and ask for assistance. Other States should consider invoking the Vienna Mechanism and ask the targeted states questions that would help them to highlight the problem and receive assistance.

4.20 The work of the Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) to address propaganda, disinformation and hate speech should be activated, considering the huge role these malign tools now play in preparing and justifying conflicts, wars, and war crimes, and indoctrinating the public. More active work is needed, with more conclusive recommendations and guidelines, more visible input, including work on building alliances supporting this work through advocacy. Given unlikely prospects of adopting an OSCE Ministerial Council decision on addressing propaganda and disinformation, RFoM should cooperate more actively in this field with other intergovernmental organisations which have had

progress in adopting their norms and regulations to address this problem, such as the EU and the Council of Europe; develop recommendations on addressing the problem, especially in the context of the functioning of online platforms; promote the idea of developing international guidelines on the principles of countering propaganda and disinformation while protecting freedom of expression; work with civil society by investing in education of society members, explaining to the public the dangerous impact of propagandistic and disinformation narratives, promoting critical thinking and media literacy, and fostering community dialogue; address the lack of information security and sovereignty in Europe in the context of functioning of global online platforms as information emergency; develop internal procedures on more effective RFoM engagement with civil society; expand the circle of civil society partners, going beyond the usual circle mostly limited to media freedom NGO to involve other NGOs and civic groups that could be RFoM's allies in the efforts to combat propaganda and disinformation.

4.21 OSCE structures should embed gender equality principles and 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, and ensure the safety, recognition, and support of women peacebuilders and human rights defenders.

4.22 OSCE structures and participating States should more actively support monitoring missions in conflict-affected areas and more actively use the Moscow Mechanism when early warning signs are detected. Their contribution is essential for early action in conflict situations as well as for fighting impunity and establishing accountability mechanisms. In states and regions where the OSCE has no field operations but where a potential of conflict revival exists, other OSCE instruments, such as fact-finding missions, should be actively used. When the OSCE is prevented by participating States from sending a monitoring mission, its bodies should be more actively engaged in distant monitoring and regularly use civil society documentation and testimonies of experts, witnesses, and victims.

4.23 OSCE structures and participating States should take into serious consideration analysis and recommendations in the recent report on the OSCE toolbox by the European Leadership Network, including the need to revive political will of participating States to actively use the toolbox; modernise and update tools in the areas which are interesting to participating States such as cybersecurity, disinformation, modern conflict scenarios; revamp some engagement formats; increase enhanced capacity building, including for local civil society actors; and improve interagency cooperation.

4.24 OSCE structures and participating States should consider shifting the OSCE role from engaging in track two and track three diplomacy processes in conflict situations to high-level political engagement, leaving tracks two and three to international, national and local NGOs and supporting them in these efforts, rather than competing with them. They should reactivate the OSCE role in mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, taking into account experiences of the functioning of the Minsk Group.

4.25 Proper conflict analysis, including stakeholder analysis, is of paramount importance for effective conflict resolution. In particular, a conflict party should not act at the same time as a mediator or a peacekeeper. This is illustrated by the role of Russia in the Geneva International Discussions. While the format includes Russia as one of the negotiating parties, Russia perceives itself as a mediator in the discussion on security in the South Caucasus, causing a deadlock in negotiations. The same applies to the 5+2 format of the Transnistrian Settlement process where Russia imposed its peacekeeping and mediating role, blocking progress in resolving the conflict. The OSCE should establish a principle that a State party to a conflict cannot act as a mediator in relevant negotiation formats and a peacekeeper.

4.26 The problem of prisoners of war and illegally detained civilians persists in a number of conflicts, such as in the aggression against Ukraine and the wars in Nagorno Karabakh. The OSCE should take an active role in addressing the problem of missing persons as it undermines post-conflict transformation.

4.27 Protracted displacement of people continues to be one of the roots of conflict revival. The needs and priorities of people in the situation of protracted displacement and of people living on conflict-affected territories should be addressed as a matter of priority. They should be supported as important participants of post-conflict reconstruction, conflict transformation and reconciliation.

4.28 Building durable peace after the end of hostilities is not possible without truth, justice for the victims, and ending impunity of the perpetrators, including accountability for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Impunity breeds new crimes, new aggression, and therefore there is limited preventive value of peace arrangements that lack the transitional justice component. OSCE structures and participating States should aim at attaining sustainable peace as a way to end the Russian aggression against Ukraine as well as other conflicts, as opposed to merely arranging a ceasefire.

4.29 If a peace agreement is concluded to stop the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the OSCE potential and expertise should be utilised to the maximum extent possible to ensure sustainable peace, including using the OSCE as a platform to conduct negotiations on arms control and confidence-building measures, elaborate new security norms or improve the existing ones, assist in implementing post-negotiations arrangements and monitor their implementation, send monitoring and fact finding missions, facilitate peace-building dialogue, etc. Monitoring and early warning should be done not only in Ukraine and Russia, but also in Belarus as the state complicit in the aggression.

4.30 Developing infrastructure for peace requires a shift from "negative peace" (no violence) to positive peace (rule of law, protection of human rights, strong democratic institutions, social cohesion, resilience to violence, etc.). States should support the approach by the CPC and field missions that links the short-term conflict prevention with the long-term structural one and addresses the root causes of conflicts. Improvement in human security is the best investment in conflict prevention, as it creates pre-conditions for peaceful conflict transformation. However, the ability of field missions to act is limited by their mandates, resources, and pressure from states. Post-conflict transformation should not be left to field missions alone; civil society has to play a more prominent role.

4.31 Relevant OSCE bodies should develop a post-conflict transformation framework and strategy for each conflict region, based on social, political and other characteristics of the situation and engage civil society in drafting such strategies. They should include not only the building of democratic institutions, good governance and rule of law, but also cover broad post-conflict dialogue in the society, de-construction of stereotypes, combating propaganda, enhancing culture of remembrance and critical reflection, including through cultural activities, formal and informal educational programmes.

5. Addressing conflicts and concerns in the politico-military dimension of security: The role of civil society

5.1 Civil society remains an untapped potential in the OSCE's work in the politico-military dimension, including its work on the conflict cycle. While some OSCE bodies involved in conflict-related work strive to engage with civil society actors, these efforts are not sufficient: civil society expertise and information are not used effectively, and necessary information is often not provided to them. While civil society is well integrated in the human dimension, it remains largely excluded from the first dimension activities. Definitions of what civil society is vary in the OSCE: experts from think tanks and academic institutions dominate politico-military spaces, while NGOs and grassroots groups are considered "activists" and are confined to participation in the human dimension activities. This inconsistency limits inclusive dialogue and decision-making in the first dimension. Yet civil society – especially from conflict-affected regions – offers expertise in the situation on the ground, early warning capacity, and legitimacy among the affected populations. Civil society would be able to contribute much more in addressing conflicts if it was provided with early warning indicators, receive technical support and capacity building in collecting information on early warning indicators, systematically consulted by the Special Representatives on mediation in particular conflict situations, and actively involved by field operations in designing, implementing and evaluating dialogue programmes.

5.2 In spite of guidelines and agreements and commitment of the relevant bodies and individuals, the OSCE system of working on conflicts often appears non-transparent for civil society, having no entry points for information and cooperation, and slow, especially when rapid response is required. Acknowledging the sensitive nature of the work of the CPC and the "quiet diplomacy" conducted by the HCNM, greater transparency in their conflict prevention work and better communication with civil society beyond the limited circle of their regular sources is necessary. Information on early warning signs from broader civil society does not reach the CPC and the HCNM in a systematic manner as there are currently no effective mechanisms in place for civil society to forward relevant information.

5.3 While civil society's ability to act during the acute stage of a conflict is limited, it can make a strong contribution to transitional justice by documenting violations of international humanitarian law and thus fight impunity and help to prevent new conflicts. Documentation by civil society may be used in legal and truth finding processes, help to provide legal representation to and rehabilitation of victims of conflict, and be used to counter divisive narratives spread by parties to the conflict.

5.4 The role of civil society is especially crucial in the current situation where historical prejudice, enemy images, and xenophobic narratives are again on the rise in many countries due to the surge of nationalistic and populist forces who manipulate public opinion and increase tensions. Civil society could play a stronger role in mobilising members of 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.

5.5 Since parties to many conflicts are so entrenched, it is often difficult to change the nature of the conflict. Therefore, the role of civil society in conflict resolution is ever more important. However, peace negotiations and mediation efforts, including those in the OSCE framework, do not involve civil society, contrary to best practices. Dialogues between political actors taking place in the conflict settlement formats are closed to and distanced from civil society and affected communities.

5.6 Human rights defenders, peacebuilders, including women and youth, play a particularly important role in peacebuilding by being active in the protection of civilians against violence, monitoring human rights violations and the implementation of peace agreements, advocacy for peace and human rights, socialisation to values of peace and democracy as well as development of the in-group identity of marginalised groups, building inter-group social cohesion by bringing people together from adversarial groups, facilitation of dialogue on the local and national level and beyond borders, and creating caring economy which helps to create entry points for all of the above elements of peacebuilding.

Recommendations

5.7 OSCE structures and participating States should create spaces and processes for systematically including civil society in meetings and discussions in the first dimension of the OSCE. They should actively use the untapped potential of civil society's work in conflict prevention (including early warning and early action), conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict rehabilitation and make use of relevant civil society documents and recommendations in the field of security and working on conflict, including the Stockholm Declaration and the documents of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process.

5.8 Coordination, communication, and cooperation of the OSCE with civil society regarding early warning, monitoring, conflict resolution, mediation, transitional justice, and peacebuilding should be enhanced, including by the establishment of communication platforms and mechanisms for each specific conflict or crisis in participating States with and without OSCE field missions. Therefore, OSCE structures and participating States must institutionalise broad and cross-dimensional engagement to fully benefit from civil society's contribution. This should include the development of regular and secure mechanisms for civil society contributions and systematic consideration of civil society input in conflict-related decision-making. Civil society is not optional – it is foundational.

5.9 OSCE structures and participating States should institutionalise broad and meaningful civil society participation from both research and practice fields in dialogues in the politico-military dimension, moving beyond invitations to think tanks or academic institutions and ensuring the inclusion of a broad range of civil society groups and grassroots organisations from conflict-affected regions.

5.10 OSCE structures and participating States should ensure that civil society representatives play an active role in the ongoing discussions on re-building security in the OSCE region.

5.12 The OSCE should establish a structured mechanism for civil society to contribute to its early warning systems – for instance, through a model similar to ODIHR's hate crime reporting portal.[3] Enabling civil society input into the OSCE's Network of Early Warning Focal Points and the CPC SitRoom would strengthen the OSCE's ability to act before conflicts escalate.

5.13 The Conflict Prevention Centre (CPC) could contribute to addressing this gap by:

- setting up an effective communication channel with civil society, aimed at developing a more structured exchange on a regular basis between civil society organisations and the CPC. This should include the regional level where it could be implemented, for example, in the form of a regional advisory board. A first step could be designating a civil society liaison in the CPC, so that communication is not spread in a way that you have to go from one geographic desk to another and deal with every separate issue with another person;

[3] ODIHR Hate Crime Report, https://hatecrime.osce.org/

- expanding a circle of CPC's civil society partners both on the local and OSCE-wide level; including representatives from women's organisations, youth and minorities groups;
- considering changing the status of early warning indicators from an internal OSCE document to a public document in order to allow it to be shared with civil society to ensure a better flow of quality information;
- meanwhile, organising dialogue with civil society on OSCE early warning methodology and on how CSOs can best contribute to it, possibly leading to the establishment of a more formalised cooperation with the OSCE; developing guidelines for CSOs on effective provision of relevant information to the OSCE, specifically as regards early warning information and early action recommendations; holding trainings for CSOs on early warning methodologies;
- considering using the experience of ODIHR's Tolerance and Non-discrimination Department as a model for ensuring effective information input from civil society through a portal where they collect information for their reports on hate crime; this portal has a template for reporting by NGOs, where NGOs could upload information, making the process of submitting information for ODIHR reports structured and safe for civil society.

5.14 A human dimension crisis should serve as a key warning sign for a political-military security crisis. It requires an early response before it escalates into an armed conflict. Civil society groups gave warnings on these early signs in many conflicts, but their voice has not been heard. In its turn, shrinking civic space is an early warning sign of instability but remains insufficiently recognised as a security issue. OSCE structures and participating States should consider suppression of civil society activities in a participating State as an early warning indicator that may be part of a process leading to a human dimension crisis and further to a security breach at the international level. They should expand efforts to strengthen civil society, oppose restrictive policies and legislation, and protect the persecuted activists as part of the OSCE work to ensure comprehensive security and prevent conflicts.

5.15 Relevant OSCE structures should ensure more effective civil society involvement in all stages of mediation and negotiation processes – including women and affected communities. Models such as the Civil Society Support Room[4] (Syria) or CivilMPlus[5] (Donbas) offer practical guidance for inclusive conflict resolution formats. In particular, OSCE bodies should address the problem of the lack of transparency in selecting civil society representatives for consultations with Special Representatives on particular conflicts before a round of official mediation or negotiation processes takes place; create an opportunity for civil society organisations to proactively request to be involved in such consultation processes; apart from the consultations of Special Representatives on particular conflicts with civil society before a round of official talks, hold debriefings by the Special Representative after the talks; work towards providing a role for civil society in the international Geneva dialogues on conflicts in Georgia.

5.16 OSCE Chairpersonships and participating States should support the creation of a permanent, full-time position of the Special Representative on Civil Society with sufficient resources and an extended mandate to facilitate civil society's meaningful engagement in OSCE's conflict-related work.

5.17 Civil society can help address the OSCE's low visibility. Public understanding of the OSCE's role is crucial to its legitimacy and effectiveness of its work on comprehensive security. Strategic communication must be strengthened, and civil society can help amplify the OSCE's mission, increase its relevance, and connect it to the communities it serves.

[4] The Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), https://cssrweb.org/en/

[5] CivilM+, https://civilmplus.org/en/

6. Ensuring effective addressing of environmental security concerns by the OSCE

6.1 Reflection Group members recognise the centrality of environmental concerns to the Helsinki process from the outset. 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."[6] OSCE participating States have made significant decisions with regard to the environment over time, underscoring the importance of the issue to the OSCE and efforts to incorporate environmental and climate change security concerns into relevant decision-making processes.[7]

6.2 The OSCE has created institutional support to address environmental and climate concerns, including through Aarhus Centres throughout the region. Aarhus Centres are vital tools for collecting and disseminating environmental information, yet many face significant challenges or are not as active as they could be. These can serve as repositories of information, coordination points for activities, and focal points for inclusion of civil society in more important ways.

6.3 The OSCE has also made important efforts to incorporate gender, migration, conflict, and other key issues that address the intersectional nature of environmental and climate concerns. Broadening the understanding of comprehensive security to include these complex and interrelated issues is critical to understanding and addressing the threats facing the OSCE participating States and our societies, and the scope, depth, and breadth of those threats.

6.4 Civil society groups and local community members are invaluable sources of data on climate related issues including emissions, resource use, and regional solutions. At the same time, attacks on environmental defenders by state and private actors are increasing, and their security is increasingly threatened. Inclusion of civil society into solutions to address the enormous environmental and climate security challenges we face has been insufficient in the OSCE to date. Similarly, local efforts to address climate change in particular, but also environmental issues, have not played a central enough role in the work of OSCE participating States.

6.5 Insufficient resources are available to address the multitude of environmental and climate challenges, including an absence of political will. Although recent chairpersonships of the OSCE have placed environment and climate at the forefront of concerns, which is an important and valued step, we need greater institutional capacity to address environmental and climate concerns, in all their complexity, as they will only grow in the coming years.

Recommendations

6.6 The OSCE should place environmental security and the climate crisis much higher on the OSCE agenda, substantially activate work in this field and support these efforts by providing the necessary resources.

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[6] "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

[7] Kate Watters, "Climate Justice and the OSCE: The Urgent Need to Support Civil Society for Successful Environmental and Climate Action," https://civicsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Kate-Watters_Climate-Justice-and-the-OSCE-civil-society-imperative.pdf, pp. 2-3

6.7 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.

6.8 The OSCE should conduct a more comprehensive annual review of participating States' records on implementing their second dimension commitments and involve civil society in this effort. By facilitating transparent reviews and accountability mechanisms, the OSCE can ensure that commitments translate into tangible progress, countering tendencies to neglect or backslide.

6.9 Participating States should address the weaponisation of environmental damage and disasters during violent conflict, such as in the course of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, study documentation by civil society organisations, and focus on using legal instruments to bring perpetrators to account and ensure justice to victims.

6.10 The OSCE should establish the position of a 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 security of environmental and climate defenders, the OSCE should establish a similar mandate.

6.11 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, and include their representatives in monitoring, reporting, analysis, deliberations and program development, implementation and assessment.

6.12 Civil society should be much more vigorously included in OSCE work on environmental security and climate change to ensure that climate and environmental programmes of OSCE bodies and participating States use the data they collect and solutions they propose as well as help the people and communities that need support the most. The Office of the Coordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities and OSCE field operations should be activated in more substantial ways to engage with national and local civil society and local communities in OSCE participating States. This engagement should utilise the resources of the Aarhus Centre Network with its more than 30 centres in all four OSCE sub-regions. The OSCE should support strengthening these centres by providing logistical support and working with governments to remove bureaucratic or political obstacles. These centres can play a critical role in enhancing public awareness and facilitating access to environmental data.

6.13 The OSCE should strengthen capacity building for civil society organisations working on environmental and climate issues, similar to its support for human rights organisations. It should offer in-person and online trainings and financial support for local environmental initiatives. Participating States should consider establishing a dedicated fund for supporting long-term research and data collection by civil society and research organisations.

7. Adopting feminist perspective to security

7.1 Discussions on the future of the Helsinki process 50 years after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act must not only reaffirm its foundational principles but also modernise them to meet contemporary security challenges. This includes a better understanding that a feminist, intersectional, and human-centred approach is essential for building sustainable peace, human security, and gender equality. They are essential for social well-being, environmental sustainability, and the protection of future generations. An exclusive focus on the military dimension of security and the increasing militarisation of conflicts, alongside shrinking space for civil society, undermine peace processes.

7.2 In the OSCE, there is a deficit of gender analysis of underlying root causes of conflict and violence, which has a strong impact on the protection and participation of women and marginalised groups as change makers and actors in a preventive approach. Gender sensitive conflict analysis, including differential impact of conflict, needs to be developed in the OSCE. Active involvement of women in the work on realising the comprehensive security concept, especially conflict-affected women, and their networks, should be safeguarded.

7.3 Women are key actors against radicalisation and violent extremism and all forms of discrimination, not necessarily as mothers but as persons and legal subjects with voice and power to act. Women are also key actors in post-conflict rehabilitation, formulating post-conflict transition, trauma healing, and transitional justice measures. A priority goal across the OSCE region must be to develop concrete mechanisms which will increase women's participation at all levels of decision making and negotiation.

7.4 Research consistently shows that peace agreements, diplomacy, and negotiations are more effective when women and grassroots organisations are meaningfully included. Gender sensitive information is crucial to early warning systems and can reveal otherwise unseen conflict drivers and triggers. To implement the Beijing Platform for Action and UN Security Council Resolution 1325, calling for increased roles for women in conflict prevention, the OSCE's conflict early warning systems must be strengthened profoundly with regard to gender issues. While OSCE bodies are well aware of gender implications, just like other international organisations, the OSCE struggles to integrate them effectively into early warning analysis from a conceptual point of view.

Recommendations

7.5 Gender equality must be embedded in the OSCE comprehensive security framework to ensure women's active participation in peacebuilding mechanisms within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework. To achieve this, the OSCE must open its structures to greater civil society participation, integrating intersectional feminist perspectives into decision-making and utilising the women's movement's expertise to define alternatives to the massive militarisation of conflicts. OSCE institutions and participating States should work with each other and other international actors towards full implementation of UNSCR 1325 and the WPS agenda and ensure meaningful engagement of women's organisations in all stages of conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

7.6 OSCE structures and participating States should leverage feminist expertise in sustainable peacebuilding in the cross-dimensional approach, recognising that:

- cross-dimensional approach to security and peacebuilding should be prioritised;
- security has a strong economic dimension—women, as primary caregivers, play a crucial role in peacebuilding;

- early warning signals from local communities and women's networks must be prioritised in conflict prevention;
- context-specific confidence-building measures should be expanded, with greater recognition of care initiatives as integral to peace efforts;
- the role of women-led civil society in shaping peace processes should be elevated;
- climate challenges are underestimated, disproportionately affecting women's lives and freedoms;
- democratic space for inclusive and participatory dialogue, ensuring gender-sensitive peacebuilding at all levels, should be provided, including at the community level (strengthening solidarity, reconciliation, and anti-discrimination initiatives), the regional level (supporting cross-border cooperation, education, and women's leadership in peacebuilding), and the multilateral level (creating meaningful spaces for civil society participation in the OSCE's first dimension, ensuring that women's voices are at the core of security dialogues).

7.7 Participating States should take greater responsibility for integrating gender-sensitive, emancipatory policies into peace and security efforts, including:

- strengthening investments in social infrastructure—healthcare, education, and care services—to enhance human security;
- advancing arms control, disarmament, demobilisation, and rehabilitation efforts, with a strong focus on curbing the proliferation of small arms and light weapons;
- ensuring accountability for human rights violations by tackling patriarchal dominance and militarised masculinities, implementing anti-discrimination measures, and prosecuting violations at local, regional, and multilateral levels;
- guaranteeing women's equal participation in conflict prevention and peace processes,
- ensuring OSCE conflict prevention tools are fully implemented in all agreements.

7.8 The OSCE must fully utilise its diplomatic capacity, embracing transparent and inclusive public diplomacy that meaningfully integrates women's voices, organisations, and networks, including:

- a renewed Agenda for Peace, mainstreaming conflict prevention and human security throughout the conflict cycle. This should be informed by a critical study of the social, ecological, and economic impacts of military spending and activity;
- a new Gender Action Plan, rooted in the practical experiences of WPS initiatives on the ground. Women's organisations must be actively engaged in shaping this plan to ensure its effectiveness in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. A Women's Conference, similar to the 1990 Berlin Conference, could serve as a milestone event in this process;
- increased investment in training programs, workshops, and informal dialogue spaces that empower local women as key actors in early warning and crisis management and bolster their management capacity;
- specific humanitarian efforts, including care and assistance for the most vulnerable and displaced people, with a specific focus on the situation of women.

8. Expanding civil society engagement with the OSCE and protecting civic space: What the OSCE structures and participating States can do

8.1. The history of the OSCE and a part of its ethos are closely linked to civil society engagement, as joint efforts of the Helsinki groups from various regions together with government actors shaped the initial stages of the Helsinki process. Although today a range of opportunities for civil society organisations (CSOs) to participate in various OSCE meetings remains, there is no obvious mechanism for them to affect OSCE policies and decision-making. Individual parts of the OSCE may initiate contacts with CSOs and involve them in various activities, but there is no coherent and comprehensive policy on citizen engagement. There is also an obvious gap between participation in OSCE meetings or various modes of expert involvement, on the one hand, and influence on both operational and political level of the organisation, on the other. Citizens' participation in the OSCE remains largely symbolic and is limited to the lower forms of engagement, while upper stages of participation are completely out of reach.

8.2. In seeking a meaningful engagement with and influence on OSCE structures, civil society stumbles on the reality that declarations about participation are not backed by relevant policies and procedures, funding, professional incentives, and training and skill development for CSOs. This needs to change if there is a genuine interest in promoting the Helsinki principles and not just declaring them.

8.3. The Reflection Process participants also noted that in recent years, with the large-scale war of aggression by Russia against Ukraine and the deepening ideological rifts between participating States, capacities for any external engagement at the OSCE, including by civil society, have been decreasing. As a result, while civil society's contribution to the comprehensive security in the region and the realisation of the Helsinki principles is vital, its potential for the OSCE work remains largely untapped.

8.4. As there exist quite a variety of avenues for interaction between CSOs and OSCE bodies, the problem preventing the development of more meaningful and impactful engagement is not the lack of entry points but a lack of political will. Moreover, the abuse of the consensus rule by some participating States and pressure by autocratic governments on the work of field operations add to the problem.

8.5. As the holding of the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) has been blocked by Russia in the past few years, to overcome the veto, since 2022 HDIM has been replaced by a Chairpersonship conference on the human dimension. Unfortunately, while the format of these annual conferences allows for more side events by CSOs and more time for civil society interaction with delegations, many of these engagements have mostly a symbolic nature, with very limited substantive reaction to civil society proposals and almost no follow-up.

8.6. Similarly, the Civil Society Parallel Conference organised by the Civic Solidarity Platform on the eve of the annual OSCE Ministerial Council meeting, has become largely a symbolic act, since substantive reaction to the analysis and recommendations presented by civil society and a follow up by key actors remain very limited if not absent. The same applies to interactions on the margins of the Ministerial Council meeting itself, where a number of civil society representatives participate as observers.

8.7. One of the ways to avoid existing challenges in expanding civil society engagement with the OSCE is stimulating interaction with informal working bodies of participating States, which allow for a focused work on problematic issues. One of the good practices in this regard has been participation of civil society experts in the work of the Human Dimension Committee. Another one is Chairpersonship consultations with civil society on relevant topics considered a priority by the CiO and CSOs.

8.8. Establishing a mandate and appointment of the Special Representative of the CiO on Civil Society under the Chairpersonship of North Macedonia in 2023 and continuation of this practice by Malta in 2024 and Finland in 2025 has been an important step forward. However, this mandate needs shaping of more concrete content, developed tools, and necessary resources.

8.9. The way forward in the present challenging conditions might be a stronger political will that would give enough courage to Chairpersonships, other OSCE bodies, and participating States to take bold steps and seek creative solutions that do not require consensus decisions by all participating States.

8.10. There are at least two main reasons why the OSCE should be actively involved in efforts to protect civil society space. First of all, the OSCE acquis includes a number of specific commitments related to free and unobstructed work of civil society, including some unique ones, having no analogues in other intergovernmental frameworks, such as special guarantees on freedom of movement for NGO representatives / human rights defenders involved in cross-border monitoring of human dimension conditions in the participating States. Secondly, recognition of civil society actors as natural allies in upholding the Helsinki principles implies a necessity to protect them from harassment and reprisals and create favourable conditions for their work.

8.11. In the context of the rapidly deteriorating situation of civic space in many participating States, severely limited resources and the lack of political leverage that OSCE currently has, it cannot effectively react to all the threats to civil society in the region and inevitably has to prioritise.

8.12. OSCE structures and participating States have at their disposal an extensive set of tools for protecting civil society space, such as including this goal in Chairpersonship priorities, invoking the Moscow and the Vienna mechanisms specifically in respect of situations when civil society is under attack, issuing joint statements, using country visits by Secretary General for raising questions related to persecution of civic activists with the authorities, adoption of resolutions by the Parliamentary Assembly, etc. However, these tools could be used more effectively and strategically. Moreover, relevant efforts by various OSCE stakeholders need to be better coordinated and streamlined.

Recommendations

8.13. OSCE structures and participating States should analyse the existing and potential avenues of civil society engagement in the implementation of the Helsinki principles and consider strengthening these mechanisms and developing new ones that would include not only symbolic recognition of importance of the work of CSOs, but would be based on treating them as partners in deliberations, drafting of documents and the development and implementation of programmes and activities.

8.14. Chairpersonships should:

- hold regular consultations with civil society on topics considered a priority before the assumption of the Chairpersonship and throughout the year;
- extend annually the mandate of the Special Representative of the CiO on Civil Society, appoint a prominent figure to this position, consider tasking the mandate holder with acting as a focal point between OSCE bodies and institutions on matters of civil society participation in the OSCE work and the protection of civil society space across the OSCE region, fill the mandate with concrete content and tools, and allocate necessary financial and administrative resources.

8.15. Chairpersonship, institutions and participating States should provide substantive reaction and a follow up to analysis and recommendations presented to them by civil society.

8.16. OSCE participating States should:

- establish an informal "group of friends of civil society" which would focus on developing joint strategies on reversing the backlash against civil society, expanding civil society space in the OSCE region and enhancing civil society participation in OSCE work;
- overcome the symbolic nature of meetings with CSO representatives on the margins of human dimension events, Parallel Conferences and Ministerial Council meetings by turning them into a joint process of reflection and planning.

8.17. OSCE structures and participating States should:

- put the problem of shrinking civil society space and persecution of human rights defenders and other civil society representatives much higher on the OSCE agenda;
- regard reprisals against civil society actors for cooperation with the OSCE as an attack on the OSCE itself and its concept of comprehensive security;
- develop and put to work a system of reacting to repressive laws and policies restricting civil society space and cases of persecution of human rights defenders and other civic activists and CSOs, with a clear "division of labour" between relevant OSCE bodies and institutions;
- adopt and implement a special mechanism of quick reaction to reprisals against CSOs and activists for their cooperation with the OSCE;
- focus their protective efforts on those civil society actors which are directly involved in or contribute to OSCE's programs and activities, those working in the areas affected by conflicts, and those who are involved in cross-border monitoring of human rights.

8.18. ODIHR should:

- consider activating its work on securing civil society space by developing a system of indicators on the freedom of association and security of human rights defenders, holding systematic monitoring of the situation in participating States, producing regular and ad hoc reports;
- consider updating the existing Guidelines on security of human rights defenders (2014) and Guidelines on freedom of association (2015);
- reinstate a dedicated 'focal point on human rights defenders' and publicly disseminate the information about it and its contacts.

8.19. OSCE Parliamentary Assembly should:

- organise special events on the issue of protecting civil society space and persecution of activists and encourage its members to bring these discussions to their national parliaments;
- develop a clearer mandate for its Special Representative on civil society in order to maximise its impact and ensure coordination and synergy with the work of the Special Representative of the CiO on civil society, politically support this mandate, provide it with necessary resources and appoint an authoritative parliamentarian to this position;
- look into how its Special Representative on political prisoners could contribute to addressing the situation of imprisoned human rights defenders and other civil society activists.

9. Expanding civil society engagement with the OSCE: What civil society can do

9.1. The Reflection Process participants recognised that in order to expand civil society engagement with the OSCE and make it more meaningful and effective, special efforts are necessary not only on the part of the OSCE structures and participating States, but also by civil society itself.

9.2. The level of interest and participation among civil society in the OSCE could be significantly higher. Many civil society representatives engaging with the OSCE for many years have been disappointed and discouraged by the lack of practical impact of this engagement on the way the OSCE works and on the real situation of human security in their countries and the OSCE region. Others choose not to engage with the organisation in the first place, focusing their efforts on other intergovernmental frameworks that are seen as more resourceful, effective and impactful. The third category of civil society actors are simply unaware of the various aspects of the OSCE work that may be important for their goals and of the existing engagement opportunities. It was observed that CSOs regularly and systematically interacting with the OSCE structures have developed into quite an "elite" community, represented mostly by people who know each other for a long time. Special efforts are needed to convince wider circles of CSOs and social movements to start looking at the OSCE as a target of their advocacy, their interlocutor and potential partner.

9.3. It was also observed that an immediate consequence of genuine civil society abandoning OSCE spaces is that this void is filled by GoNGOs supporting (or representing a position of) authoritarian states as well as groups promoting conservative anti-human rights agenda.

9.4. Civil society actors continuing to actively engage with the OSCE, including the Civic Solidarity Platform and its members, should reflect on what they are actually bringing to the table (is it only the professional expertise that they can offer, or can they also represent wider public interests?), strive to mobilise wider support among their societies, and start building new alliances, also with organisations and people that one does not think of first, as well as in countries and regions beyond the OSCE as such.

9.5. The modern Helsinki movement needs to re-think and reshape itself in accordance with the current challenges in order to build muscles and change the existing balance of power. Engaging many more people in work with the OSCE – from both organised civil society groups and a broader spectrum of social actors – will potentially allow the Organisation to increase its influence (see also Chapter 10).

Recommendations

9.6. In order to develop a more effective and meaningful engagement in the OSCE work, civil society should:

- not abandon civil society's work with the OSCE due to its ineffectiveness and the current institutional crisis, but direct efforts to preserve and expand the existing opportunities for civil society engagement in OSCE work and make them more effective along with continuing developing proposals on modernising the Organisation and advocating for making it more fit to respond to multiple international crises and its own institutional challenges;
- assess the need of rebuilding the previously existing but currently unavailable avenues for participation of civil society in OSCE work;
- be strategic in choosing where civil society has to engage to achieve the best results; evaluate effectiveness of existing and potential mechanisms of civil society engagement in OSCE work

from the perspective of civil society's ability to influence political, programmatic and operational level of the Organisation;

- develop and promote concrete recommendations and guidelines for OSCE bodies, institutions and participating States on effective engagement with civil society;
- follow and understand internal OSCE politics, stay updated on the current debates and the angles from which various OSCE actors approach key and often divisive issues; try to find common language to discuss these issues and build cooperation with various actors;
- try to proactively identify allies among representatives of OSCE structures and delegations of participating States, understand their concerns and possibilities, discuss issues of common interest, cultivate relations and build trust with them through dialogue and cooperation;
- focus on active interaction with informal working bodies of participating States as an effective way of expanding civil society engagement in OSCE work allowing to overcome the problem of the abuse of consensus decision-making rules;
- advocate more actively for the establishment of an informal "group of friends of civil society" comprised of delegations of supportive participating States;
- advocate for holding regular Chairpersonship consultations with civil society on relevant topics considered a priority by the Chairpersonship and CSOs before the assumption of the Chairpersonship and throughout the year; prepare for such meetings and bring concrete ideas and proposals there;
- make consistent efforts to overcome civil society's artificial confinement to the third dimension with its systematic exclusion from the first and second dimensions as well as branding of CSO representatives as "activists" with limited expertise as opposed to "experts" from think-tanks and academic institutions; more actively participate in the activities and meetings in the first and second dimensions, focusing on the work on conflicts, hybrid threats, climate crisis, countering transborder corruption, etc.; develop an OSCE-wide strategy for civil society integration across all three dimensions;
- strive to build up and exercise civic agency in civil society engagement with the OSCE by moving beyond ceremonial inclusion of CSOs in OSCE events, when they are relegated to a role of providers of monitoring information, to proactively claiming a role as partners in deliberation of challenges and strategies of response, agenda-setting, joint decision-making, participation in the implementation and evaluation of outcomes; build institutional pathways for participatory governance and introduce mechanisms for joint agenda-setting, generating feedback from OSCE structures and participating States, and institutionalisation of advisory roles for CSOs;
- put forward concrete proposals on action plans and roadmaps for implementation of the OSCE Ministerial Council decisions, guidelines by OSCE institutions, recommendations in the Moscow Mechanism reports, etc. and proactively engage with interested participating States and OSCE institutions to discuss the proposals, work together on drafting and implementing decisions;
- work to overcome scepticism about civil society's greater role in the Helsinki process on the part of participating States and OSCE bodies;
- work to overcome the "elitist" character of the current civil society engagement with the OSCE by expanding the circle of CSOs and activists involved in this work and make efforts to hold offline meetings of civil society representatives working to promote the Helsinki principles on a more regular basis and in a more deliberative, inclusive, and participatory way, aimed at collective decision-making, cross-generational dialogue, solidarity and cooperation between movements and beyond borders.

10. Advancing the Helsinki principles beyond the OSCE: What civil society can do

10.1 Re-centering the OSCE around its original purpose to serve as a platform for dialogue, rights, and cooperation across divides means ensuring that civil society is not a symbolic participant, but a strategic partner with real influence across all dimensions of security policy – from military affairs to environmental resilience and social cohesion. This reinvestment in human security, rooted in the Helsinki principles, is the only path forward to a peaceful and just international order.

10.2 The defence and advancement of the Helsinki principles cannot rely solely on states. Civil society organisations, both as watchdogs and a visionary force, must reclaim a proactive role in updating and advancing these principles – within and beyond the OSCE. The civic actors of the 1970s who gave rise to the Helsinki Movement – grassroots monitors, dissidents and human rights defenders – transformed the Final Act from paper into pressure, from promise into performance. Today, a new generation must undertake a similar challenge, but in a vastly more complex and dangerous geopolitical environment.

10.3 This is not just a matter of defending "space" for civil society. Civil society must move from reacting to repression to reshaping the agenda. This includes pioneering new forms of engagement, building strategic alliances across sectors and regions, and articulating a people-centred vision of security rooted in human rights and justice, inclusion and participation.

10.4 Not all civic formations may speak the language of "OSCE commitments," but they act on them through anti-war work, climate justice, feminist and anti-racism mobilisation and defence of human dignity. Yet, just as NGOs of the familiar formation, they are also heirs to the Helsinki legacy. To remain relevant and make an impact, we must experiment with new approaches: embedding the Helsinki principles into transnational civic networks; transforming the notion of comprehensive security into a truly people-first agenda; and connecting the dots between local struggles and global accountability mechanisms. It is about reviving Helsinki from below and beyond borders.

Recommendations

Following the lessons of the Civic Solidarity Platform and recommendations from the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process seminars, civil society groups should unite their efforts in the following areas:

10.5 Support and protect civic actors at risk:

- understanding that repression of human rights defenders, independent journalists and lawyers is a critical security issue, strengthen legal, digital, and material support systems for civic groups and activists, especially those in exile or under authoritarian regimes;
- develop mutual aid protocols and emergency response networks, drawing from the lived experience of solidarity under pressure (e.g., Belarus, Russia, Central Asia, etc.);
- form civic resilience networks to ensure protection and continuity of work despite repression;
- use the OSCE space to highlight attacks on civic actors as threats to the integrity of the Helsinki principles.

10.6. Expand public engagement and human rights education:

- launch educational and awareness raising initiatives ("Spirit of Helsinki / Human Security schools") to promote civic knowledge and transfer of practical experience, as well as participatory skills and civic imagination;

- replace tokenistic participation with citizen assemblies, dialogue forums, and educational formats in multiple OSCE languages; shift from expert-only models to participatory ones where communities are agents, not audiences;
- engage youth and underrepresented communities to build long-term civic capacity and re-legitimise human rights discourse;
- raise awareness about the Helsinki principles and the notion of comprehensive and human security among civil society as well as among diplomats and government representatives.

10.7 Ensure economic and operational sustainability:

- reflecting numerous calls for structural sustainability, explore alternative funding models – social enterprises, community-supported initiatives, crowdfunding, and solidarity economies – to reduce dependency on shifting priorities of governmental programmes and volatile cycles of private donors. Encourage the creation of civic infrastructure – legal, logistical, and economic – that does not rely solely on donor agendas.
- promote horizontal resource-sharing among civil society actors and diaspora groups.

10.8 Reclaim and renew the Helsinki principles:

- promote Helsinki+50 Manifesto and push for reinterpreting the 1975 Helsinki principles through contemporary lenses: climate justice, intersectionality, anti-war agenda, anti-authoritarianism, and solidarity with oppressed peoples;
- form thematic civic clusters (e.g., digital rights, environmental justice, transitional justice, peacebuilding) that act within and beyond OSCE frameworks;
- use anniversaries not merely for reflection, but as opportunities to mobilise collective memory and action.

10.9 Build durable and intersectional coalitions:

- reach beyond the human rights movement by building bridges with global justice movements and proactively establishing cross-sectoral, intersectional, and intergenerational alliances — including with environmentalists, climate defenders, trade unions, anti-war groups, feminist movements, LGBTQ+ networks, indigenous peoples, diasporas, and others;
- create sustained, trust-based working groups that can respond to crises, build joint advocacy, and sustain presence in international fora;
- learn from the Helsinki movement's legacy and Civic Solidarity Platform's evolution to avoid fragmentation and strengthen long-term trust-based collaboration.

10.10 Engage strategically with institutions — within and beyond the OSCE:

- use existing OSCE platforms tactically to spotlight civic concerns and push for structural reforms;
- channel relevant recommendations to other international bodies (e.g., UN Human Rights Council, Council of Europe) and engage subnational actors such as cities and parliaments as alternative sites of diplomacy and civic influence;
- reassert civil society not as a supplementary stakeholder, but as a co-architect of security, peace, and human dignity.

List of reports on the seminars held in the framework of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process

Reports are published on the webpage of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process:
https://civicsolidarity.org/article/helsinki-50-reflection-process/

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The papers are published at https://civicsolidarity.org/article/civil-society-engagement-with-the-osce-insights-from-the-helsinki-50-expert-seminars/

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