

# THE OSCE: FIGHTING FOR RENEWED RELEVANCE

The OSCE is battling against a loss of relevance. It has been weakened by differences among its member states, competition from other security organisations, the consensus rule, and a lack of visibility. These challenges are the other side of the coin of the OSCE's comparative advantages: its broad membership base and its comprehensive concept of security. While a trend reversal is currently not in the offing, the need for an organisation such as the OSCE remains. It may be able to enhance its relevance once more.



Preparing for Switzerland's 2014 OSCE presidency: Ambassador Thomas Greminger (left) currently runs the Human Dimension Committee. Vienna, 27 May 2011. *Image: OSCE*

In 2011, at the end of his term as secretary general of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Marc Perrin de Brichambaut remarked that the organisation was much like his job: vital, unfinished, ambitious, marginalized, experimental, reactive in times of crises, and both exciting and frustrating for those who are involved in it. Feelings of frustration are likely to have dominated more recently. For more than a decade now, observers have been diagnosing a loss of relevance on the part of the OSCE caused by the erosion of its normative consensus, the deadlock that coincides with East-West antagonisms long thought to have been overcome, and the risk of being deprived of its substance by the EU, NATO, and the Council of Europe. The current weakness of the OSCE

also manifests itself in more practical terms. The war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 was one of the low points as the organisation was unable to prevent an armed conflict between two of its member states. The OSCE's field mission in Georgia was subsequently shut down, and the task of mediating between Moscow and Tbilisi largely fell to the EU. The Astana summit in 2010, the first meeting of heads of state and government in over ten years, failed to produce a joint action plan. The OSCE's budget dwindled from €209 million (2000) to just under €151 million (2011), and the number of field missions and activities is in decline as well. Russia's decision to suspend the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty) in 2007 further weakened the OSCE's relevance, al-

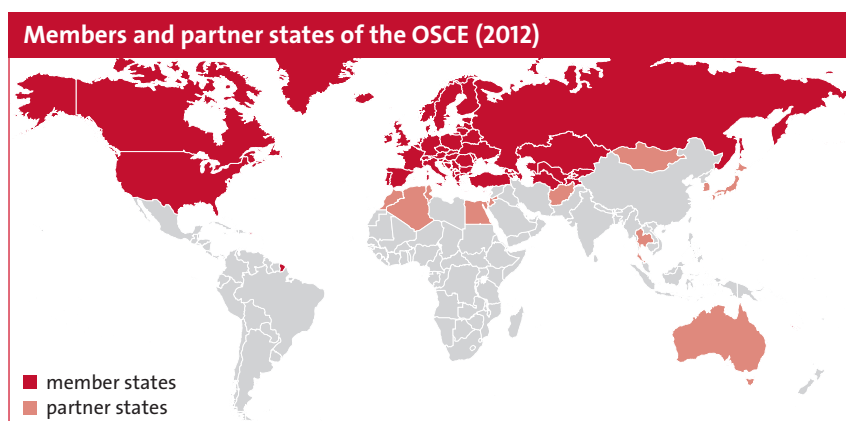
though the treaty is not part of the organisation's actual acquis.

A look at the conflicts in the OSCE region reveals that there is still a need for the organisation's services. With a better-defined role, a better demarcation from other actors, and a concentration on its core competencies, the OSCE could re-establish itself as a more attractive forum for debates on security issues among its member states. Nonetheless, however, it is important to remember that its relevance also depends heavily on the overall strategic environment and on the political relations between its members.

## An organisation sui generis

The OSCE is the largest regional security organisation. Its aim is to ensure security and peace in the Euro-Atlantic region. It brings together 56 member states from Europe, North America, and Asia, in addition to 12 cooperation partners from Asia, Australia, and the Mediterranean (cf. map). Its headquarters are located in Vienna. With a budget of €150.8 million (2011), the OSCE employs around 2'830 people. Almost 550 work in the OSCE Secretariat and specialised institutions, while the others are employed in one of the currently 16 field missions and activities.

The OSCE's predecessor was the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). Based on the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, the CSCE established an East-West dialog during the Cold War. It was the result of a compromise: The Western powers accepted the territorial status



quo in Europe (integrity of borders and the principle of non-interference in domestic affairs), while the Eastern bloc accepted the human dimension of security (human rights, fundamental freedoms) as a legitimate topic for negotiations. After the Cold War, the CSCE went from being a forum for political dialog to become an organisation with permanent institutions and operational capabilities. In 1992, the first field mission was deployed to Kosovo. Over 30 missions have been completed to date. At the Budapest summit of 1994, the member states signed off on the organisation's new structures and renamed it the OSCE. Its main focus was now on the new security challenges. Early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict peacebuilding became its central areas of activity.

The OSCE is an organisation *sui generis*. It is not based on a foundational treaty in international law and is not a legal entity in its own right. On the one hand, this increases its flexibility. On the other, however, the consensus decisions taken by its members are only politically, not legally binding. The OSCE is characterised above all by its multidimensional understanding of security. According to this conception, security comprises three interdependent dimensions: the political/military dimension, the economic and environmental dimension, and the human dimension. The OSCE is active on all three levels, with the economic and environmental dimension being the least developed. The organisation engages in a broad range of activities. The political/military dimension includes arms control, disarmament, border management, counter-terrorism, conflict prevention and mediation, police training, and the establishment of confidence-building measures (e.g., information exchange, inspections). As part of the economic and environmental dimension, the OSCE promotes insti-

tutional capabilities in its member states, supports business initiatives, and studies the environmental consequences of armed conflicts. The human dimension has gained importance since the end of the Cold War. Here, the organisation's activities aim at protecting human rights and promoting democracy and the rule of law. Measures include election monitoring (e.g., at the Russian presidential elections in 2012), combating human trafficking and discrimination (e.g., against Roma and Sinti), and the promotion of free media.

The OSCE institutions are relatively weak. The power of decisionmaking lies primarily with the member states. Periodically, summits are held among heads of state and government, and the foreign ministers convene once a year as the Council of Ministers. Ambassadors of the member states meet weekly in Vienna at the Permanent Council and in the Forum for Security Cooperation. The chairperson-in-office, the foreign minister of the country holding the OSCE's annually rotating chairmanship, also has an influential role. Together with the predecessor and the appointed successor, the chairperson forms the Troika tasked with ensuring continuity. The secretary general in Vienna and the Parliamentary Assembly in Copenhagen have only limited powers. Important specialised institutions are the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFM).

The OSCE connects the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions. It is the only European security organisation in which both the US and Russia are full members. Its broad membership base, along with its consensus-based decisionmaking, comprehensive understanding of security, and experience as a platform for dialog and action provide

the OSCE with a potentially important position within the European security architecture. But despite the initially encouraging signs of an increased convergence of security interests between East and West, the OSCE did not become the nucleus of a pan-European security framework after the Cold War as some observers had expected and Moscow had hoped. On the one hand, the importance of conventional disarmament diminished. On the other, old and new democracies favoured the expansion of more exclusive, less heterogeneous organisations like the EU and NATO. Against the backdrop of Russia's unmet expectations, new competing organisations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) were founded in the East as well, creating a patchwork of numerous security organisations within the OSCE area. The OSCE served primarily as a "training camp" for countries wishing to join the EU and NATO.

### Loss of relevance

For about ten years now, the OSCE has been struggling against a loss of relevance. This challenge stems from a number of reasons: firstly, competition from other actors; secondly, paralysis of the organisation due to an East-West split; and thirdly, its diffuse profile and low degree of visibility. Europe's security architecture has changed, and the OSCE has become less attractive as a consequence. The expansion drives of NATO and the EU were crucial factors. Numerous countries joined these two organisations, which had more to offer their members than the OSCE did: concrete security guarantees as well as economic and financial prowess. NATO and the EU also introduced frameworks of association apart from full membership, reducing the importance of the OSCE's encompassing nature.

The OSCE also faced competition in its areas of activity. With the establishment of a common security and defence policy, the EU became active in areas that had previously been regarded as core competencies of the OSCE, e.g., election monitoring, conflict mediation and field missions (e.g. EUPM in Bosnia-Herzegovina, EUMM in Georgia after the 2008 war). This led to a duplication of competencies on unequal terms, as Brussels has vastly greater resources. There is also an overlap between the OSCE and the Council of Europe, particularly in the human dimension of secu-

ity (e.g., promotion of human rights and democracy). Vienna and Strasbourg have established co-ordination mechanisms. A clearer division of labour exists with NATO, which as a defence alliance guarantees the military security of its members. The UN, in turn, has recognised the OSCE as a regional organisation, while the OSCE itself regards support for the UN, e.g. in the area of conflict prevention, as one of its tasks. Here, too, co-operation and division of labour are crucial. There is no argument over jurisdiction when it comes to authorising sanctions and coercive measures, which is done under the aegis of the UN Security Council.

The renewed East-West divide within the OSCE is also problematic, since it weakens the organisation's ability to act. NATO/EU countries stand in opposition to Russia and other likeminded states, in the context of the generally tense political relations between Moscow and Washington, in particular with regard to the Eastern expansion of NATO and the US development of a missile defence shield. OSCE-specific factors are also important, specifically the erosion of the normative consensus among member states and the crisis of confidence this has entailed. With the end of the Cold War, the OSCE's human dimension gained in importance. In Copenhagen (1990) and Moscow (1991), member states agreed that obligations relating to the human dimension (human rights, democratisation, good governance) could not be considered as exclusively domestic affairs. The introduction of relevant instruments ("Moscow mechanism") implied a curtailment of the sovereignty principle.

This development is meeting with increasing resistance from Moscow. The dominant view in Russia is that the co-operative strategy of the 1990s has failed. Western states, it is believed, have ignored Russian security interests, e.g., with regard to missile defence and the CFE treaty, and there is a widespread perception that the West has not respected Moscow's sphere of interests, as evinced by its support of the "colour revolutions" in Central Europe. Russia makes three accusations in particular: First, that the human dimension within the OSCE is overemphasised at the expense of the political/military dimension. Secondly, that the OSCE resolves the tension between state sovereignty (territorial integrity, non-intervention, inviolable borders) and fundamental rights of the people (human rights, self-determination) in a lopsided

manner favouring the latter (e.g., when recognising the independence of Kosovo). And thirdly, that the geographic equilibrium of the OSCE's activities has been lost. The OSCE, according to this view, essentially only intervenes 'east of Vienna', although relevant issues also exist further West (e.g., Basque country, Northern Ireland). This criticism culminated in 2007, when Russian President Vladimir Putin accused the OSCE of having degenerated into a vulgar instrument of asserting Western interests.

Due to the consensus rule, the split between East and West paralyses the organisation. Member states failed to pass a joint action plan at the Astana summit and did not agree on final statements at several ministerial meetings. The budget was also the subject of frequent dispute. The rift has led to key OSCE missions not being extended or their mandates being watered down (e.g., Georgia, Belarus, Uzbekistan). Similarly, Moscow tried to strengthen political control over the relatively independent OSCE institutions (ODHIR, HCNM, RFM). The current logjam has also impeded any clarification of the OSCE's legal status and the passing of an OSCE convention. The Western states suspect that Russia would use this as an opportunity to weaken the organisation's competencies and limit the autonomy of its institutions.

The OSCE's low degree of visibility is also not helpful to its reputation. Usually, the organisation only enjoys media coverage during election-monitoring campaigns and summit meetings. Aside from that, it rarely creates positive headlines. Its most important successes (such as the missions in Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia) are a thing of the past. In Europe's "frozen conflicts", e.g., in Transdnestr or Nagorno Karabakh, where the OSCE has long been active, progress is a long way off. The hard day-to-day work that the OSCE performs competently in many places (e.g., Kyrgyzstan mission, activities of ODIHR and HCNM) often goes unnoticed by the public. Success in conflict prevention is notoriously difficult to demonstrate. As a result, public awareness of the OSCE's relevance is limited at best.

This effect is further intensified by the OSCE's diffuse profile. After 1989/91, its activities grew organically rather than in a strategically controlled manner. This resulted in the currently almost excessively broad range of activities, from conflict prevention, over the fight against terrorism, and human trafficking to the promotion

## Documents and information

- [1975 Helsinki Final Act](#) ↗
- [1994 Budapest Document](#) ↗
- [2010 Astana Declaration](#) ↗
- [2011 Vienna Document](#) ↗
- [2012 Irish OSCE Chairmanship](#) ↗
- [Centre for OSCE Research \(CORE\)](#) ↗

of media freedom and trade. Extending OSCE activities into the domains of energy security and cybersecurity is also being discussed. Added to this is the lack of continuity arising from the rotating chairmanship and the limited strategic planning competencies of the OSCE secretariat. While cross-dimensional activities are part and parcel of the OSCE, they also carry the risk of dissipating energy in the absence of clear thematic focus.

## Prospects and potential

The relevance of the OSCE depends heavily on the political climate and on relations among its member states. A substantial increase in importance requires greater unity among OSCE countries and country groups with regard to the design of the international security architecture, especially that of the OSCE. Such a development is currently not in the offing. At the same time, the continued need for the OSCE is clear as well. The Georgian war showed that there is no long-term democratic peace in the OSCE region. Here, too, minority issues, breaches of human rights, and deficits in democracy persist. It is precisely in these its core activities that the OSCE can therefore play a particularly important role. It is also possible that the OSCE will gain in relevance on the operational level, as the EU is presently absorbed with the debt and currency crisis.

After the low point of the Georgian crisis, some silver linings can be found concerning the relevance of the OSCE. The Corfu Process helped re-establish a basic level of trust among OSCE member states by encouraging a renewed dialog. Optimists do not interpret the Astana summit as a failure either, but rather point out that the OSCE's *acquis* was confirmed by the heads of state and government as part of the summit declaration. They also emphasise that, after the de-facto suspension of the CFE treaty, the OSCE and the Vienna Document are the only remaining platforms for confidence-building measures. While it is still too early to talk about a trend reversal, an increase in the OSCE's relevance cannot be ruled out either. The OSCE itself could

facilitate this process through a better-defined division of labour with other security organisations and by avoiding a dissipation of its thematic focus.

### Swiss chairmanship for 2014

The OSCE is an important platform for Swiss foreign policy. It is the only European security organisation in which Switzerland is a full member. Switzerland is also historically affiliated with the OSCE. As a member of the neutral and non-aligned states, it played an important role in the CSCE process. In 1993, a permanent delegation was established in Vienna. On the operational level, Switzerland sent notable troop deployments to support the Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1996–2000) and the Kosovo Verification Mission (1998/99). Because the OSCE plays a major role in its foreign policy, Switzerland has a greater interest in strengthening the organisation than some other states do.

Switzerland acts as a bridge-builder in the OSCE. Similarly to its role in the UN, it aims to mediate between groups of countries and formulate proposals on which consensus may be reached. It does so, for example, in the Human Dimension Committee, which Switzerland chairs in 2011/12 and where it concentrates much of its energy. For example, Switzerland initiated a voluntary peer-review process in the committee in which members provide information on their progress in the human dimension. Other focal areas are the promotion of consultations on the 1999 Vienna Document, where at least a technical revision was achieved in 2011, and the strengthening of the OSCE's mediation capacities. The annual contribution to the ordinary budget, based on an allocation formula, totals around CHF6 million (2011), in addition to about CHF0.6 million in non-assessed contributions.

The role of a bridge-builder comes at a propitious time for Switzerland. In 2014, it will assume the OSCE chairmanship for the second time after 1996. It had applied for the 2014/2015 presidency alongside Serbia. The OSCE members unanimously accepted the dual bid in a silent election in February 2012. In the lead-up, Berne and Belgrade had adopted the Principles of Co-operation, in which they agreed to co-ordinate their priorities and activities. This includes the formulation of a joint action plan. The Serbian-Swiss approach is innovative and serves to bring more continuity to the work of OSCE. As a positive side effect, the close

co-operation also mitigates certain reservations that various states had held with regard to Serbia's chairmanship.

The thematic priorities are currently under discussion. Switzerland must coordinate this with Serbia and Ukraine, the third Troika member. The OSCE's needs and Switzerland's preferences are both important in this context. Questions pertaining to the OSCE's legal status and to the role of the OSCE Secretariat may play an important role on the institutional level. Possible thematic priorities may be the strengthening of conflict-resolution mechanisms, particularly in the field of mediation, and a revision of the Vienna Document. Geographic priorities will depend heavily on the developments that present themselves at the time. The co-operation with Serbia also brings Southeastern Europe to the fore, while the established Swiss presence in Central Asia suggests a greater focus in this region. Moreover, the 2014 Winter Olympics in

Sochi should draw public attention to the Caucasus region.

The list of agenda items for 2014 is thus already a long one, and the Swiss Federal Council has set up a task force to set definitive priorities. Switzerland's aim must be an active and thoughtful presidency that makes the most of its leading position in a currently weakened organisation. In this way, it can help boost the organisation's relevance, not at least in pursuit of its own interests.

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