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OSCE Insights

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Nomos



Institute for Peace Research
and Security Policy
at the University of Hamburg

Parliamentary Diplomacy and Cooperation on Counterterrorism: Lessons from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of interparliamentary engagement in shaping international counterterrorism efforts, highlighting its key benefits. Focusing on the counterterrorism activities of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly from 2017 to 2024, the authors argue that interparliamentary involvement has heightened awareness among lawmakers, generated new policy guidance, and fostered greater interparliamentary coordination on counterterrorism issues. The findings suggest that parliamentary diplomacy and cooperation can enhance global security governance—including counterterrorism efforts—by infusing intergovernmental efforts with democratic legitimacy and enriching them with cohesive, human rights-compliant proposals.

Keywords

OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, diplomacy, interparliamentary cooperation, counterterrorism, committee

To cite this publication: Marco Bonabello and Pauline Hennings, “Parliamentary Diplomacy and Cooperation on Counterterrorism: Lessons from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly,” in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Nomos, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748960751-01>

Introduction¹

The OSCE provides its fifty-seven participating States with an inclusive forum for dialogue on security issues and a flexible platform for joint action in early warning, conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation. Established at the end of the Cold War,² the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA)

has, from its inception, sought to promote the greater involvement of national parliaments in OSCE affairs. Its mission aligns with the growing relevance of parliamentary diplomacy in international relations³—a development driven by the rising number of transnational challenges confronting national parliaments.⁴ As such, parliamentary diplomacy complements and builds on traditional state diplomacy through both bilateral and multilateral initiatives, particularly in contexts where traditional diplomatic efforts are overly rigid or lack legitimacy.⁵ Whereas traditional diplomacy is usually steered

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by national governments in line with ruling parties' agendas, parliamentary diplomacy tends to be more inclusive, incorporating perspectives from both ruling and opposition parties. As a result, it reflects a broader spectrum of views at the international level.

With 323 parliamentarians from fifty-six national parliaments⁶ representing over one billion citizens, the PA reviews the OSCE's activities, discusses top security challenges, and promotes cooperation, with a particular focus on consolidating democratic institutions.⁷ It employs various mechanisms to fulfill its mandate, including resolutions and committees.

In this paper, parliamentary diplomacy is considered in close connection with interparliamentary cooperation.⁸ While parliamentary diplomacy involves managing relationships, resolving conflicts, and influencing policies through dialogue and negotiation, interparliamentary cooperation typically entails more practical, collaborative efforts among lawmakers from multiple countries to achieve tangible outcomes. Accordingly, parliamentary diplomacy is both a prerequisite for and a component of interparliamentary cooperation.

This contribution examines whether parliamentary diplomacy and cooperation (PDC) can contribute to global counterterrorism efforts. To this end, it examines the PA's activities in this domain from 2017 to 2024. The analysis draws on the authors' direct experiences as members of the International Secretariat

at of the PA at the time this research was carried out. Sources include first-hand observation, archival records from the International Secretariat, publicly available documents, feedback from PA members and partners, quantitative data on the Ad Hoc Committee's composition and activities, and relevant academic literature.

The paper considers the composition and role of the Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism, assessing its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its contributions to policymaking, legal implementation, and coordination. The conclusion offers a forward-looking perspective on potential future PA initiatives and presents recommendations for enhancing PDC in the counterterrorism domain.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism

Establishment, challenges, and value

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, OSCE lawmakers sought to address terrorism-related challenges in line with relevant UN Security Council Resolutions.⁹ The OSCE progressively expanded its role in promoting the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy (A/RES/60/288),¹⁰ and the PA began advocating for effective, human rights-compliant strategies for preventing and countering both terrorism and violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism (VERLT). A key milestone in this effort was the PA's 2018 Resolution

on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and VERLT,¹¹ which underscored the need to embed traditional law enforcement efforts within a whole-of-society approach that addresses the underlying drivers of terrorism and violent extremism while adhering to international and human rights law. The resolution highlights the crucial role played by local communities, civil society, religious groups, and educational institutions in countering terrorism and stresses the unique contributions of parliamentarians through their legislative, oversight, and budgetary functions.¹² In addition, it recognizes the importance of interparliamentary forums for promoting policy coherence and international cooperation through the exchange of ideas and lessons learned.

In July 2017, the PA established the Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism (CCT)¹³ as a new interparliamentary instrument to address terrorism and VERLT by monitoring trends, sharing lessons learned, and exploring new approaches, among other strategies.¹⁴ The PA aimed to enhance counterterrorism efforts through forward-looking policy development and coordinated initiatives. That said, how best to operationalize this ambition remained an open question. While it was crucial to ensure the balanced representation of different subregional dynamics, weighing the experience of certain countries, it quickly became clear that including all national delegations risked burdening the committee with excessive bureaucracy. Consequently, the PA President appointed ten members from across the

OSCE area, each with a strong commitment to counterterrorism, to serve under the leadership of a newly designated Chairperson.¹⁵

The establishment of the CCT also exposed some inherent limitations of PDC. The PA had limited resources and expertise on issues typically handled by specialists and practitioners. This necessitated two key measures: securing adequate administrative and advisory support within the PA's International Secretariat and allocating a dedicated budget to fund the CCT's initiatives. Expanding the International Secretariat's internal capacity was essential to ensuring continuity of purpose, given that the high turnover among committee members—due to electoral cycles—posed a challenge to long-term strategic engagement.

Adding to this were the competing demands on CCT members' time. Many parliamentarians were already heavily engaged in their national legislative agendas, while some were also active in other parliamentary assemblies, such as the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly and NATO's Parliamentary Assembly. This made it imperative to secure a strong buy-in from members by focusing on issues of high relevance to their constituents, thereby bridging national and international efforts while maximizing their limited availability.

With respect to the PA's statutory goal of promoting security through dialogue, increasing its operational activities required updating its toolbox. Traditional technical assistance projects—such

as legal drafting and capacity building—were quickly ruled out owing to the political nature of the PA. Even so, there was room to explore initiatives better suited to the role of parliamentarians, including thematic hearings, field visits, oversight initiatives, and policy dialogues.

In understanding where and how the PA could add value, it was crucial to capitalize on the unique strengths of PDC. Chief among these is its inclusivity; as it brings together parliamentarians from both ruling and opposition parties, its deliberations reflect a broader spectrum of perspectives. Second, its flexibility allows for swift mobilization, enabling the rapid arrangement of field visits, focused debates, and targeted media messaging. Third, its informality reduces bureaucratic constraints, fostering more open and frank exchanges. Its political and public outreach is also an asset, as national parliamentarians maintain direct access to national leaders and media outlets. Finally, PDC benefits from majority-based decision-making, which is a clear advantage in times of growing international polarization and geopolitical tensions. If effectively leveraged, these attributes could be drawn on to enhance the PA's visibility in the international counterterrorism arena.

Focus

A key challenge for the committee was determining whether to focus primarily on structural issues of widespread concern or on specific crises, such as terrorist at-

tacks. Addressing shared global challenges would enable the CCT to adopt a long-term approach rather than operating in a reactive, short-term mode. Ultimately, the former option aligned more closely with the mandate of the CCT, which was also conceived as a confidence-building mechanism within the PA.

Against this background, the CCT conducted scoping visits and meetings with international experts—starting with OSCE executive structures and the UN¹⁶—to map the institutional counterterrorism landscape, identify key challenges, and assess potential areas for parliamentary engagement.

Based on this assessment, the CCT established five overarching priorities: strengthening border security and information sharing, in accordance with UNSCR 2396 (2021); fostering prevention efforts to counter VERLT, especially online and among youth; promoting the prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) and their families, including women and children; exploring the intersection of terrorism and other serious challenges, such as armed conflict, organized crime, and emerging information and communication technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI); and supporting victims of terrorism. Additionally, the committee recognized human rights protection and the mainstreaming of gender and child-related considerations as concerns that cut across all counterterrorism efforts. Accordingly, the committee forged a network of strategic partnerships with

organizations such as the OSCE and the UN, leveraging their expertise and resources to address these complex challenges.

Composition¹⁷

The CCT consists of ten to sixteen legislators from across the OSCE region, appointed by the PA President. The committee is led by a Chair (also appointed by the President) and supported by a small team in the International Secretariat.¹⁸

During the observation period (July 2017 to December 2024), the committee

comprised a total of thirty-eight parliamentarians, 34 percent of whom were female and 66 percent of whom were male. Female representation within the CCT appears slightly higher than in the PA as a whole, where women constitute around 30 percent of members, according to the 2024 Gender Report.¹⁹

The thirty-eight committee members belonged to twenty-seven different OSCE participating States, distributed as follows: two from North America, five from Asia, six from Eastern Europe, seven from South East Europe, and eighteen from Western Europe.

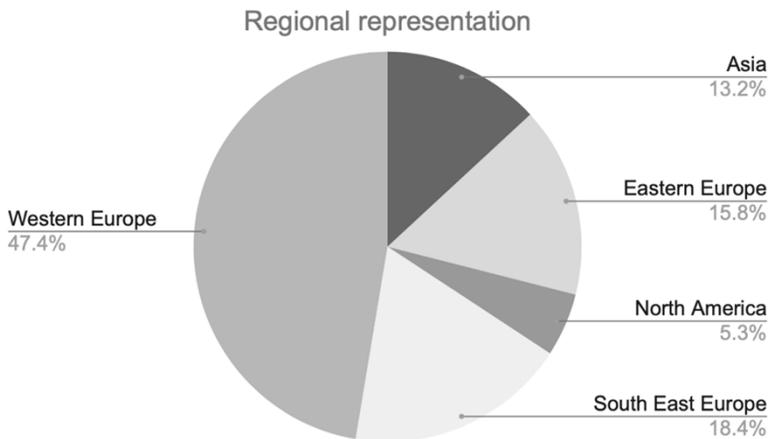


Figure 1. Composition of the OSCE PA CCT with regard to regional representation (July 2017 to December 2024).

While a European preponderance within the CCT is to be expected—given that approximately 80 percent of OSCE participating States are European—the inclusion of representatives from diverse OSCE

subregions enabled the CCT to remain alert to developments across the entire OSCE area. Several other parliamentarians, including observers from countries with Partner for Co-operation status in

the OSCE,²⁰ also contributed to different CCT initiatives, further extending the committee's geographical reach.

In terms of political affiliation, identifying and comparing ideological tendencies across members from different political and cultural contexts remains largely speculative, especially given the absence of formal political groupings within the PA.²¹ Even when identifiable, political

ideologies tend to evolve over time, further complicating the analysis.

Despite these complexities, a general assessment suggests that the majority of CCT members (60.5 percent) were broadly associated with conservative groups, while approximately 37 percent belonged to either social democratic, liberal, or independent groups.

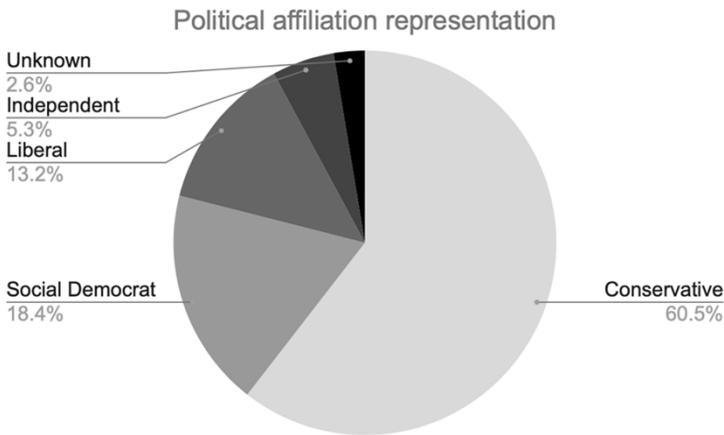


Figure 2. Composition of the OSCE PA CCT with regard to political affiliation (July 2017 to December 2024).

This distribution appears to reflect broader political trends across the OSCE region, which are also represented in the composition of the PA as a whole.²² In the context of the CCT, this trend may also signal a particular interest in counterterrorism issues among members from more conservative groups.

Finally, approximately 29 percent of CCT members belonged to opposition parties, while 44 percent belonged to ruling coalitions during their tenure. A further 18 percent represented both ruling and opposition blocs at different points, following political shifts in their national parliaments.

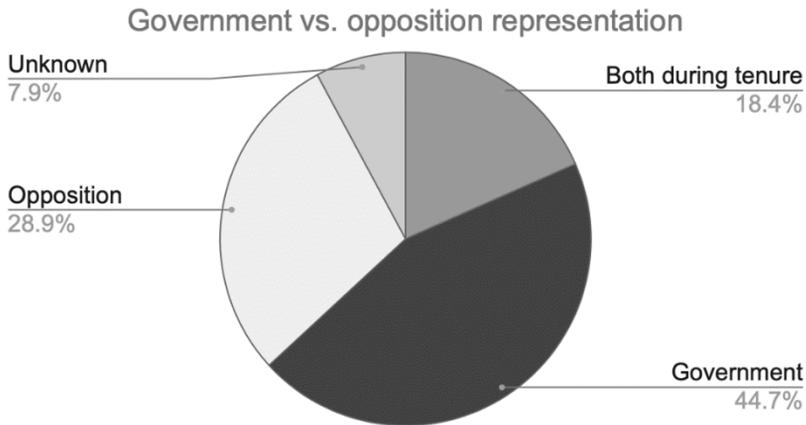


Figure 3. Composition of the OSCE PA CCT with regard to government and opposition party membership (July 2017 to December 2024).

Taken as a whole, the data would seem to confirm the inclusive nature of parliamentary diplomacy in general and the CCT’s work in particular. Members of both genders, from different subregions, and across ruling and opposition coalitions—as well as those representing both conservative and progressive ideological perspectives—were able to engage and enrich the new Committee’s agenda.

Activities and human rights

During this period, the CCT held nineteen official meetings in ten different countries,²³ providing members with the opportunity to engage with leading experts and discuss their strategic priorities. These meetings were further complemented by twenty-one public reports, which were debated before the PA. Ad-

ditionally, the CCT conducted eight official country visits to assess needs on the ground and engage with local stakeholders.²⁴ The CCT also contributed to dozens of international conferences, sharing lessons learned and promoting key OSCE commitments.

Throughout its work, the CCT consistently emphasized the importance of placing human rights at the core of counterterrorism and mainstreaming gender and child-related considerations. One key area of focus was the complex situation of women within the FTFs phenomenon.²⁵ While they may be liable for terrorism-related offenses—such as traveling abroad to join terrorist groups or aiding and abetting acts of terrorism—they are also often victims of grave abuses and/or mothers of traumatized children. The CCT also considered the needs of these children, advocating their repatriation,

rehabilitation, and reintegration wherever possible. At the same time, the committee stressed that child-sensitive procedures should be incorporated into border security and information-sharing measures.²⁶ Recognizing that young people are both targets of radicalization campaigns and potential promoters of counterterrorism narratives, it also highlighted the importance of youth engagement, which it pursued by fostering connections with youth networks and holding dedicated parliamentary debates.²⁷

Outcomes and limitations

Taking 2024 as an example, the PA engaged twenty-three members²⁸ in eleven major counterterrorism initiatives,²⁹ bringing them into dialogue with approximately eighty international and national experts and more than 120 parliamentarians from across the globe. In terms of impact, three main outcomes can be identified. First, committee members developed a deeper awareness of contemporary counterterrorism issues. Second, interparliamentary cooperation expanded, fostering greater collaboration and confidence building among legislators. Third, the PA advanced policy convergence on key issues related to preventing and countering terrorism and VERLT, while reinforcing the centrality of human rights in these efforts.

These developments paved the way for new PA resolutions, arguably the most tangible outcome of this interparliamentary

engagement. While such efforts may also have influenced national parliamentary dynamics, assessing their precise impact remains challenging in the absence of further data.³⁰

At the same time, these initiatives were occasionally constrained by political considerations and practical limitations. While open debate on controversial issues is generally welcomed in interparliamentary settings, achieving consensus on highly polarizing issues—particularly those perceived as sensitive by domestic audiences—is not always feasible. A case in point is the situation of children of FTFs stranded in detention camps in Syria and Iraq following the military defeat of the Islamic State. Despite several international calls for their immediate repatriation,³¹ the PA was unable to adopt a formal position due to divergent views among its members.

On a more practical level, the most significant constraint was members' limited availability, which occasionally curtailed the depth of discussion and the scope of meetings. In the fast-paced environment of parliamentary work, the outcomes of meetings, conferences, and visits were often quickly overshadowed. To prevent loss of knowledge and ensure continuity, the CCT sought to build on previous findings, ensuring that each new initiative expanded upon earlier efforts.

The following subsections explore in greater detail the interconnected and mutually reinforcing areas in which the CCT sought to add value, namely: (1) developing cohesive policy guidance,

(2) supporting the implementation of the international counterterrorism framework, and (3) steering the global parliamentary counterterrorism agenda.

Policymaking

A key strength of the CCT has been its ability to unravel emerging global challenges by raising parliamentary awareness and fostering unity of purpose in addressing them. Since its establishment in 2017, the CCT has developed five resolutions covering a range of counterterrorism priorities.³² Unanimously adopted by the PA plenary, these documents demonstrate the PA's capacity to rally its members—legislators from diverse political and cultural backgrounds—around a shared, forward-looking agenda.

Although not formally binding, these resolutions express the collective will of OSCE lawmakers to find common solutions to shared concerns. As soft law instruments, they codify key policy recommendations directed at the OSCE and its participating States, aiming to inform and influence relevant policymaking efforts. All PA resolutions are formally submitted—in the form of a consolidated Declaration—to the OSCE Ministerial Council.³³

These documents provide an opportunity to build consensus among participating States on emerging threats and to catalyze new OSCE initiatives and structures.³⁴ This is especially important in the counterterrorism context, as the last

OSCE counterterrorism document was formally adopted in 2016.³⁵ Since then, achieving consensus on countering and preventing terrorism and VERLT has remained elusive.

While PA resolutions and OSCE Ministerial Council decisions may differ in terms of political weight—the former constituting recommendations reached by simple majority and the latter binding commitments reached by consensus—the underlying security needs they address do not. As such, the PA's resolutions represent meaningful contributions to the counterterrorism policy framework of the OSCE.

Moreover, PA resolutions have occasionally broken new ground in international policymaking. For example, the 2024 Resolution on Artificial Intelligence and the Fight against Terrorism³⁶ is among the first international policy efforts to examine the dual impact of rapid technological progress in this field.³⁷ The resolution suggests several measures to ensure that OSCE participating States' responses remain attuned to AI-driven developments³⁸ and is expected to positively influence regulatory frameworks at both the national and the international level.

Another example of the PA's engagement with complex contemporary issues is the 2023 resolution condemning the terroristic activities of the private military company Wagner,³⁹ adopted amid Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The resolution reaffirms that acts or threats of violence against civilians by any belligerent party in an armed conflict,

when aimed at spreading terror, are prohibited by international humanitarian law (IHL). It further highlights the complementarity of the counterterrorism legal framework and IHL, which is crucial for ensuring that the objectives of neither legal regime are undermined, and to reinforce the principle of zero tolerance for terrorism in all its forms, including in conflict zones.⁴⁰ Having determined that the Wagner Group's actions around the globe are terroristic in both nature and intent, the resolution calls on all OSCE participating States to (1) consider designating the Wagner Group as a terrorist organization, (2) hold its members accountable for crimes committed, and (3) thwart its presence wherever it operates.

The resolution gained international visibility⁴¹ and served as a basis for the adoption of similar stances by other interparliamentary assemblies and national parliaments.⁴² In doing so, it contributed to shaping a more cohesive international posture against the abuses perpetuated by the Wagner Group, its successors, and similar entities. Furthermore, the resolution serves as a clear warning to private military companies, deterring them from perpetrating similar atrocities, and may be cited as a precedent in future policy and legal discussions.

Implementing the international counterterrorism legal framework

The PA has actively sought to strengthen the implementation of the existing in-

ternational counterterrorism legal framework, especially in areas where national implementation has lagged or faced significant challenges. To this end, the CCT has supported the development and distribution of several publications addressed specifically to lawmakers, aimed at enhancing their counterterrorism engagement at both the national and the international level. Notable examples include the 2024 Parliamentary Handbook on UN Security Council 1373 (2001) on Countering Terrorism⁴³ and the 2022 Model Legislative Provisions to Support the Needs and Protect the Rights of Victims of Terrorism,⁴⁴ both produced by the United Nations with OSCE PA support.

In 2019, the PA issued its own report, *Strengthening Border Security and Information Sharing in the OSCE Region: A Parliamentary Oversight Exercise*, which examined the implementation, through the oversight powers of national parliaments,⁴⁵ of key international obligations related to border security and information sharing stemming from UNSCR 2396 (2021).⁴⁶ This initiative involved coordinating fifty-six national parliaments to assess their respective governments' progress in fulfilling specific counterterrorism obligations. Through this exercise, the PA identified several legal and operational challenges in the context of border security, leading to a series of recommendations addressed to both executive and parliamentary structures within the OSCE. These included converting executive decrees—enacted under urgency procedures—into comprehensive

legislation that upholds human rights and the rule of law, harmonizing personal data protection standards, and strengthening cooperation with private carriers. These findings were subsequently codified in the PA's 2019 Luxembourg Resolution on the Challenges Related to Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters,⁴⁷ illustrating the extent to which the PA's various streams of engagement reinforce one another.

Welcomed by the United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee in 2019,⁴⁸ this initiative demonstrated that interparliamentary assemblies can play a crucial role in supporting the implementation of international counterterrorism obligations by synchronizing the oversight powers of national parliaments, thus bridging the gap between international commitments and national enforcement.

Promoting international cooperation

The PA has created new opportunities for international cooperation on counterterrorism through strategic partnerships with OSCE structures, UN entities, and other parliamentary assemblies. These partnerships have strengthened the Assembly's knowledge and operational capacities while fostering greater engagement among parliamentarians on counterterrorism issues.

The CCT has worked closely with the OSCE Chairpersonship, executive structures, and institutions, including the Ac-

tion Against Terrorism Unit⁴⁹ and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.⁵⁰ This coordination has helped to define priority areas of engagement, ensure policy coherence and complementarity, and facilitate consultations on critical issues. OSCE experts have regularly contributed to official CCT activities, and the CCT has actively engaged with the OSCE Security Committee and OSCE Counter-Terrorism Conferences,⁵¹ supporting OSCE initiatives both at OSCE headquarters and in the field.⁵²

At the UN level, the PA has liaised with the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate and the Office on Drugs and Crime, advocating for a stronger role for interparliamentary assemblies. This cooperation laid the groundwork for the 2020 Memorandum of Understanding between the PA and the then newly established United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, which quickly became a key partner.

Alongside these endeavors, the PA has championed closer collaboration among parliamentarians across the globe, calling for a dedicated channel for interparliamentary cooperation on counterterrorism. These efforts culminated in the creation of a Coordination Mechanism of Parliamentary Assemblies on Counter-Terrorism in 2022, established under the auspices of the UN.⁵³

Also owing to its role in setting up the Mechanism, the PA was elected to preside over its work for the first two years, shaping its *modus operandi* and

thematic priorities. As of December 31, 2024, over seventeen regional interparliamentary assemblies from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas had participated in the Mechanism, meeting twice a year to share their threat assessments, coordinate efforts, and plan joint initiatives.

This new instrument has boosted global interparliamentary collaboration and facilitated the exchange of critical knowledge on preventing and countering terrorism and VERLT. In addition, it has acted as a vehicle through which interested assemblies and parliaments can convey their requests for technical assistance, thus contributing to enhancing their capacities.⁵⁴

By steering the Mechanism's work for two years, the PA has spearheaded global interparliamentary cooperation, promoting a more cohesive parliamentary approach to counterterrorism well beyond the OSCE area. For instance, the CCT has facilitated high-level engagement between legislators and renowned experts on border security and information sharing, the role of youth in preventing terrorism, and the impact of AI in countering terrorism through a series of dedicated Parliamentary Policy Dialogues aligned with the PA's priorities.⁵⁵ Finally, its leadership of the Mechanism has enabled the PA to better assess security threats stemming from adjacent regions, such as the Sahel and the Middle East.

Recommendations

In an increasingly volatile geopolitical environment, where polarization and digitalization create new opportunities for those seeking to divide and harm, countering and preventing terrorism and VERLT are likely to remain high on the OSCE's agenda.

Moving forward, the PA should prioritize promoting the implementation of its policy framework at the national level. This could be achieved through subregional policy dialogues, local awareness-raising campaigns, and other targeted projects in partnership with the OSCE and the UN.

The PA should also consider following up on the Oversight Exercise on Strengthening Border Security and Information Sharing, building on the baseline established by the 2019 initiative.⁵⁶ This model of coordinated parliamentary oversight anchored in clear international obligations could be expanded to other policy areas where implementation remains challenging, thus complementing state-level efforts. Moreover, such oversight initiatives could be launched at the global level—potentially through the Coordination Mechanism of Parliamentary Assemblies on Counter-Terrorism—to support the implementation of the international counterterrorism framework beyond the OSCE area.

Ultimately, consolidating a cross-regional parliamentary network on counterterrorism should be a strategic priority, as it would help to link the security of

the OSCE to that of adjacent regions in an increasingly interconnected world. The formal recognition of the contributions of interparliamentary cooperation through a dedicated UN resolution could serve to invigorate this process.

Finally, the PA must remain responsive to emerging needs within the international community, exploring new developments and, wherever possible, codifying common standpoints. Given growing internal divergences within the OSCE,⁵⁷ such efforts are likely to become even more pertinent. The PA could play a bridging role in this regard, advancing policy proposals that address new developments.⁵⁸

The CCT should also explore ways to improve the flow of information on the impact of its efforts at the national level, which could in turn inform and refine its future initiatives. This could be facilitated through targeted questionnaires distributed to all parliamentary delegations, special committee sessions dedicated to the implementation of CCT recommendations, and regular interviews and feedback sessions with both current and former members.

More broadly, similar interparliamentary exercises could be replicated in other areas of the international security agenda, such as climate change and AI. The PA is well positioned to detect citizens' concerns and views across the OSCE area, in part owing to the expansion of digital tools that allow parliamentarians to interact more directly with their constituencies. Facilitating the greater involvement

of parliamentarians in multilateral security affairs is critical to ensuring that international agendas align with citizens' priorities.

Against this backdrop, OSCE participating States should better leverage the benefits of PDC by allocating additional resources to support sustained interparliamentary engagement and strengthening relevant interparliamentary structures. The establishment of dedicated windows for interparliamentary engagement would reduce overlap with other institutional affairs and facilitate lawmakers' regular participation in international forums.

To maximize the impact of their engagement, national parliaments should duly consider legislators' professional backgrounds and parliamentary experience when appointing representatives to different interparliamentary forums.⁵⁹ This approach would strengthen the coherence of their work at the national and the international level, facilitating peer-to-peer knowledge exchange.⁶⁰ In parallel, codifying lawmakers' international role at the domestic level—and ensuring that it is clearly communicated to the general public—would improve transparency while also encouraging greater public engagement in global security matters.

Finally, the role of parliamentary diplomacy in promoting peace and stability should be further systematized at the international level. The Council of Europe offers a valuable precedent in this regard, as its Assembly is formally recognized by statute (Article 10) as one of its two

main organs (alongside the Committee of Ministers), placing the executive and parliamentary dimensions of security governance on an equal footing.

Notes

- 1 The authors would like to thank Ms. Elena Stocco, who kindly reviewed the paper and gave invaluable advice on how to make it more rigorous.
- 2 For more details on the creation of the PA, see OSCE/CSCE, Charter of Paris for a New Europe (November 21, 1990), <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>; OSCE/CSCE, Madrid Document (April 3, 1991), <https://www.osce.org/pa/40791>
- 3 The term “parliamentary diplomacy” commonly refers to the broad spectrum of international activities undertaken by members of parliament to foster mutual understanding between countries, enhance government oversight, better represent constituents, and strengthen the democratic legitimacy of intergovernmental institutions. See Gonnig de Boer and Frans Weisglas, “Parliamentary Diplomacy,” *Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 2, no. 1 (2007): 93–99, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187119007x180494>
- 4 De Boer and Weisglas, cited above (Note 3).
- 5 See, for example, Jerzy Jaskiernia, “Parliamentary Diplomacy: A New Dimension of Contemporary Parliamentarism,” *Studia Iuridica Lublinensia* 31, no. 5 (2022): 85–101, <https://doi.org/10.17951/sil.2022.31.5.85-101>
- 6 According to the OSCE PA Rule of Procedures (Appendix), the Holy See, an OSCE participating State, may send two representatives to the Assembly’s meetings as “guests of honor” due to the absence of an elected parliament.
- 7 OSCE PA, Rules of Procedure (November 2, 2024), <https://www.oscepa.org/ru/dokumenty/rules-of-procedure/1832-rules-of-procedure-english/file>
- 8 Kolja Raube, Meltem Müftüler-Baç, and Jan Wouters, eds., *Parliamentary Co-operation and Diplomacy in EU External Relations* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019).
- 9 Between 2001 and 2017, the PA adopted eleven resolutions related to different aspects of terrorism, mainly in reaction to new UN documents such as UNSCRs 1373 (2001), 1456 (2003), 1566 (2004), 2178 (2014), and 2396 (2017).
- 10 The United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy is widely considered the main instrument for preventing and combating terrorism at the international level. For further details, see UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, “United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy,” <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/un-global-counter-terrorism-strategy>
- 11 OSCE PA, Resolution on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism (July 11, 2018), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/all-documents/ad-hoc-committee-on-migration/3757-resolution-on-preventing-and-countering-terrorism-and-violent-extremism-and-radicalization-that-lead-to-terrorism-adopted-at-the-27th-annual-session-berlin-7-11-july-2018>
- 12 Within democratic frameworks, national parliaments act as *enablers*, shaping national counterterrorism policies; *guardians*, ensuring adherence to fundamental freedoms in all counterterrorism measures; and *mediators*, bridging diverging views within society.
- 13 The CCT currently comprises fourteen legislators from fourteen OSCE countries, led by a Chair who is supported by two Vice-Chairs. For further details, see OSCE PA, “Ad Hoc Committee on Countering Terrorism,” <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/factsheets/3614-osce-pa-ad-hoc-committee-on-countering-terrorism-factsheet/file>
- 14 For the full mandate of the CCT, see OSCE PA, “Countering Terrorism,” <https://www.oscepa.org/en/activities/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/countering-terrorism>
- 15 The Chair of the CCT is expected to preside over its meetings, represent the committee

- before external stakeholders, and steer its workplan.
- 16 See, for example, OSCE PA, “Reinforcing Counter-Terrorism Co-operation Discussed in Ad Hoc Committee’s Meetings at OSCE and UNODC,” November 14, 2017, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2017/reinforcing-counter-terrorism-co-operation-discussed-in-ad-hoc-committee-s-meetings-at-osce-and-unodc>
 - 17 The data in this section is largely drawn from the internal archives of the OSCE PA International Secretariat and from open sources available online. The current composition of the CCT can be found at OSCE PA, cited above (Note 13).
 - 18 The team at the International Secretariat consisted of a senior adviser (with previous experience in countering serious crime at the international level) and a research assistant.
 - 19 See OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues, *The 2024 Report on Gender Issues: Fostering Free and Inclusive Societies; The Role of Civil Society Organizations in a Time of Democratic Decline* (OSCE PA, 2024), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/document/s/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4995-2024-gender-report-fostering-free-and-inclusive-societies-the-role-of-civil-society-organizations-in-a-time-of-democratic-decline-eng/file>
 - 20 Namely Israel and Morocco.
 - 21 In the OSCE PA, there are no official political groups, and members sit in national delegations during statutory meetings. This structure aligns with the OSCE PA’s distinctly diplomatic character.
 - 22 Notably, the last three OSCE PA Presidents—George Tserateli (2018–2020), Margareta Cederfelt (2021–2023), and Pia Kaurma (2023–2025)—were associated with conservative groups. The PA President is elected by the entire Assembly.
 - 23 Namely Austria, Andorra, Armenia, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, the United Kingdom, and Morocco (an OSCE Partner for Co-operation). A few meetings, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, were also held online.
 - 24 Such visits were conducted in Türkiye (2024), Switzerland (2023), Norway (2020), France (2019), Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018), Belgium (2018), the United States (2018), and Morocco (2017). For further details, see OSCE PA, cited above (Note 14).
 - 25 See, for example, OSCE PA, *Resolution on the Challenges Related to Returning and Relocating Foreign Terrorist Fighters* (July 8, 2019), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/document/s/ad-hoc-committee-on-migration/3884-resolution-on-the-challenges-related-to-returning-g-and-relocating-foreign-terrorist-fighters-ad-opted-at-the-28th-annual-session-luxembourg-4-8-july-2018/file>
 - 26 See, for example, OSCE PA, *Strengthening Border Security and Information Sharing in the OSCE Region: A Parliamentary Oversight Exercise* (OSCE PA, 2019), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ad-hoc-committee-on-counterterrorism/3905-strengthening-border-security-and-information-sharing-in-the-osce-region/file>
 - 27 See, for example, OSCE PA, cited above (Note 11).
 - 28 Several of whom engaged multiple times, for a total of fifty-nine “engagements” by OSCE PA members.
 - 29 Namely, three official CCT meetings (Vienna, Bucharest, Dublin), one official CCT country visit (Türkiye), two meetings of the Coordination Mechanism of Parliamentary Assemblies on Counter-Terrorism (Istanbul, Rome), two Parliamentary Policy Dialogues (Istanbul, Rome), a panel discussion on the sidelines of the 2024 Internet Governance Forum (Riyadh), and two international parliamentary conferences (Doha).
 - 30 This could be the subject of a separate study.
 - 31 See, for example, OSCE, “Repatriation of ‘Foreign Terrorist Fighters’ and Their Families Urgently Needed to Safeguard Human Rights and Security, OSCE Human Rights Head Says,” February 11, 2020, www.osce.org/odihr/445909; Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, “Council of Europe Member States Should Urgently Repatriate Their Under-Age Nationals Stranded in

- Northern Syria,” May 28, 2019, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/council-of-europe-member-states-should-urgently-repatriate-their-under-age-nationals-stranded-in-northern-syria>
- 32 Namely, the 2024 Bucharest Resolution on AI and the Fight against Terrorism, the 2023 Vancouver Resolution on the Wagner Group’s Terroristic Nature and Actions, the 2022 Birmingham Resolution on Victims of Terrorism, the 2019 Luxembourg Resolution on Addressing the Threats Stemming from the Return and Relocation of Foreign Terrorist Fighters, and the 2018 Berlin Resolution on Preventing and Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremism, which outlines the PA’s comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. For further details, see OSCE PA, cited above (Note 14).
- 33 Moreover, they are usually shared with all presidents of national parliaments. As such, they are clearly intended to inform both intergovernmental and national policymaking. The extent to which this actually occurs could be the subject of a separate inquiry.
- 34 Looking back, the OSCE PA has often served as a precursor on key issues that were later integrated into OSCE programs and structures. For instance, the PA was among the first to advocate for greater media freedom, increased attention to gender issues, and raising the profile of human trafficking. Similarly, the security implications of AI, which were a primary focus of the Assembly in 2023–2024, is now gaining increasing traction within the OSCE. For more information, see R. Spencer Oliver, *The Parliamentary Assembly and Its Political Influence in the OSCE* (OSCE PA, 2005), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/documents-1/955-2005-the-parliamentary-assembly-and-its-political-influence-in-the-osce/file>
- 35 OSCE Ministerial Council, Declaration on Strengthening OSCE Efforts to Prevent and Counter Terrorism, MC.DOC/1/16 (December 9, 2016), <https://www.osce.org/cio/288176>
- 36 OSCE PA, Resolution on Artificial Intelligence and the Fight Against Terrorism (July 3, 2024), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ad-hoc-committee-on-countering-terrorism/resolutions-and-publications/5040-resolution-on-artificial-intelligence-and-the-fight-against-terrorism-adopted-at-the-31st-annual-session-bucharest-29-june-to-3-july-2024/file>
- 37 On the one hand, AI advancements provide opportunities to enhance data analysis, improve threat detection, and refine predictive modeling, enabling more proactive and effective counterterrorism strategies. On the other, these same technologies can be weaponized by terrorist groups for recruitment, fundraising, and the dissemination of propaganda and disinformation.
- 38 Among other measures, the resolution calls on participating States to 1) enhance their legislative frameworks and build their AI capabilities to more effectively prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism while ensuring respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms, privacy rights, and data protection standards; 2) establish robust oversight mechanisms; 3) promote media/digital literacy and enhance societal resilience against online polarization and radicalization, which can lead to terrorism; and 4) develop effective public-private partnerships to prevent and counter the misuse of AI for terrorist purposes.
- 39 OSCE PA, Resolution on the Wagner Group’s Terroristic Nature and Actions (July 4, 2023), <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/ad-hoc-committees-and-working-groups/ad-hoc-committee-on-countering-terrorism/4755-osce-pa-resolution-on-the-wagner-group-terroristic-nature-and-actions-30th-annual-session-2023/file>
- 40 The counterterrorism legal framework serves as a crucial tool in cases where IHL does not apply, such as when a terrorist attack occurs in a conflict zone but is unrelated to the conflict itself or is not committed by one of the belligerent parties.
- 41 See, for example, Thomas Latschen, “Is the Wagner Group a Terrorist Organization?,” *Deutsche Welle*, September 18, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-the-wagner-group-a-terrorist-organization/a-64111111>

- /www.dw.com/en/is-the-wagner-group-a-terrorist-organization/a-66740597
- 42 See, for example, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Legal and Human Rights Aspects of the Russian Federation's Aggression Against Ukraine, Resolution 2556 (June 26, 2024), <https://pace.coe.int/en/files/33682/html>
- 43 United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, Parliamentary Handbook on Promoting the Implementation of Security Council Resolution 1373 (2001) on Countering Terrorism (UN, 2024), https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/unoct_parliamentary_r1373_handbook_en.pdf
- 44 United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, Model Legislative Provisions to Support the Needs and Protect the Rights of Victims of Terrorism (UN, 2022), https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/sites/www.un.org.counterterrorism/files/220204_model_legislative_provisions.pdf
- 45 OSCE PA, cited above (Note 26).
- 46 Namely, advance passenger information, passenger name records, and biometric data management systems (biometrics).
- 47 OSCE PA, cited above (Note 25).
- 48 OSCE PA, "OSCE PA's Vovidis and Chambers Address UN Security Council on Parliamentary Counter-Terrorism Efforts," July 2, 2019, <https://www.osce.org/parliamentary-assembly/424631>
- 49 For further details, see OSCE, "Action Against Terrorism," <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/terrorism>
- 50 For further details, see OSCE, "OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights," <https://www.osce.org/odhr>
- 51 The latter took place in 2018, 2019, and 2020.
- 52 For example, OSCE PA, "Legislators, Experts Work on Human Rights-Compliant Policies for Prosecution, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of FTFs in South East Europe," September 15, 2021, <https://www.oscepa.org/en/news-a-media/press-releases/press-2021/legislators-and-experts-work-together>
- 53 The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism's Programme Office on Parliamentary Engagement fulfils the functions of the Secretariat of the Coordination Mechanism.
- 54 In June 2022, for example, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre of the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism conducted a National Advocacy Event with Albanian parliamentarians. For further details, see United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, "Advocacy Event: Republic of Albania; Promoting Universalization and Effective Implementation of the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism," <https://www.un.org/counterterrorism/events/Albania-Promoting-Universalization-and-Effective-Implementation-of-ICSANT>
- 55 Under its presidency (2022–2024), the PA organized four Policy Dialogues, which focused on border security and cross-border cooperation (Doha, January 2023), the impact of terrorism and violent extremism on youth (Vienna, October 2023), the protection of religious sites, symbols, and objects (Istanbul, May 2024), and countering the use of AI for terrorist purposes (Rome, December 2024).
- 56 For instance, in the context of fighting transnational organized crime and curbing irregular migration.
- 57 The OSCE has been working without an agreed Unified Budget since 2021, which has resulted in uncertainty and a series of containment measures aimed at limiting costs, hampering the organization's ability to operate at full capacity.
- 58 The last OSCE Ministerial Council Decision related to countering terrorism was adopted in 2016. See OSCE Ministerial Council, cited above (Note 35).
- 59 Ideally, members of the PA should also be involved in national parliamentary committees dealing with foreign affairs, security and defense, sustainable development, human rights, and the rule of law, among other key areas.
- 60 International parliamentary efforts should enrich national parliamentary dynamics. Creating links between relevant national and international committees could be beneficial on both levels.

Between Diplomacy and War: The Limits of OSCE Mediation in Ukraine in the Run-up to 2022

Fred Tanner*

Abstract

This study examines crisis management initiatives undertaken by the OSCE and other actors in the run-up to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. These efforts—including the Geneva Statement, the OSCE Roadmap, the Normandy Format, the Trilateral Contact Group, the Minsk agreements, and the activities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission—unfolded against a backdrop of escalating armed violence and Russian political maneuvers aimed at undermining Ukrainian sovereignty. Despite this sustained engagement, the OSCE’s facilitation and mediation efforts proved insufficient. By analyzing the inherent shortcomings, missed opportunities, and limitations of these diplomatic initiatives, this paper seeks to draw key lessons for improving future international conflict resolution efforts.

Keywords

Ukraine crisis, Russia, OSCE, Minsk agreements, Normandy Format, diplomacy, deterrence, security guarantees, European security

To cite this publication: Fred Tanner, “Between Diplomacy and War: The Limits of OSCE Mediation in Ukraine in the Run-up to 2022,” in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Nomos, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748960751-02>

Introduction¹

The protracted conflict in Ukraine—which escalated from Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and hostilities in the Donbas to a full-scale invasion in 2022—has demonstrated the limits of international crisis diplomacy. While numerous international diplomatic initiatives have attempted to de-escalate tensions and create a framework for peace

over the course of nearly a decade, all have proven insufficient to prevent further aggression. The Geneva Statement, the OSCE Roadmap, the Normandy Format, the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG), the Minsk agreements, and the activities of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) have been among the most important diplomatic efforts to stabilize the situation. Nevertheless, each initiative was ultimately hampered by structural weaknesses, deep-seated historical mistrust, strategic miscalculations, and a lack of credible enforcement mechanisms. Russia’s political maneuvering and hy-

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brid warfare tactics during this period further complicated peace efforts, exploiting diplomatic ambiguity to advance its geopolitical objectives while undermining Ukraine's sovereignty.

By analyzing these failed diplomatic efforts, this paper draws key lessons

for future conflict mediation, highlighting the importance of enforcing agreements, strengthening multilateral security, and recognizing the limits of diplomacy with uncooperative parties in a dynamic geopolitical environment.

Event	Date
OSCE SMM deployed	March 17, 2014–February 24, 2022
OSCE National Dialogue Project	March 20, 2014–April 20, 2014
Geneva Statement on de-escalation	April 17, 2014
OSCE presents Roadmap for a peaceful resolution	May 12, 2014
Roundtables on National Unity	May 2014
Normandy Format first meeting; TCG established	June 6, 2014 June 6, 2014
Poroshenko's 15-point peace plan	June 20, 2014
Minsk I agreement signed	September 5, 2014
Minsk II agreement signed	February 12, 2015
Normandy Format Declaration	February 12, 2015
UN Security Council Resolution 2202 (2015)	February 17, 2015
Normandy Format and TCG continue efforts	2015–early 2022
Normandy summit in Paris	December 19, 2019
Full-scale invasion of Ukraine	February 24, 2022

Table 1. Key diplomatic efforts in the Ukraine crisis (2014–2022).

Early diplomatic failures: From Geneva to the OSCE Roadmap

Although Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, its military intervention began much earlier, in March 2014. Following the Maidan

Revolution in late 2013 and early 2014, Russia illegally annexed Crimea and fomented violent separatism in the Donbas region, resulting in over 13,000 deaths and the displacement of millions.²

International efforts to manage the crisis were initially hampered by the intran-

sigence of the Yanukovich government, which maintained close ties with Russia. Despite holding the OSCE Chairpersonship in 2013, it opposed efforts to establish a crisis management infrastructure in the country and rejected the involvement of the UN, the OSCE, and the EU as potential mediators.³ The OSCE's central role in Ukraine began only after the ousting of President Yanukovich in early 2014. Under Swiss leadership, the OSCE took a more proactive stance, launching fact-finding missions, developing roadmaps, facilitating dialogue, and deploying a peace mission in Ukraine.⁴ The first formal attempt at international crisis diplomacy took place on April 17, 2014, at a high-level meeting in Geneva. This meeting brought together key international players—the United States, the European Union, Russia, and Ukraine—for the first time to address the escalating conflict. It concluded with the issuance of the Geneva Statement, a comprehensive framework designed to de-escalate the crisis. The Statement articulated a series of principles and tangible actions, including the disarmament of illicit armed groups, a pathway to amnesty, constitutional reforms to facilitate Donbas regional decentralization, dialogue, and an enhanced role for the OSCE.⁵

Building on the Geneva group's endorsement of the OSCE, the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (CiO) drafted a Roadmap for a peaceful settlement on May 12, 2014 (OSCE Roadmap), which outlined a comprehensive, time-sensitive, and proactive approach to the crisis in

Ukraine, outlining detailed measures for de-escalation, reconciliation, and stability.⁶ The CiO emphasized the urgency of securing support for the OSCE Roadmap from both Ukraine and Russia, aiming to create a conducive environment for Ukraine's upcoming presidential elections in May 2014.

However, the CiO's decision to seek Russia's endorsement in Moscow prior to consulting with Kyiv drew sharp criticism from Ukraine's interim government and the United States. The move was perceived as a diplomatic misstep, potentially prioritizing Russian concerns over Ukrainian interests. Russia swiftly exploited the OSCE Roadmap to its advantage, leveraging it to undermine Ukraine's position. Moscow accused Kyiv of obstructing the implementation of the Geneva Statement, alleging its failure to disarm nationalist groups and cease military operations in the east. These accusations, often unsubstantiated, served to bolster separatist factions while casting Ukraine as the primary obstacle to peace and stability in the region.⁷ At the same time, the Geneva Statement posed a problem for Moscow, as it neither legitimized separatist groups nor mandated Ukrainian federalization, thereby limiting Russia's ability to dictate the country's political future.⁸

Although the Geneva Statement legitimized Ukraine's (Maidan) government, its failure to address Crimea implied acceptance of its annexation by Russia. Escalating violence soon rendered the Geneva commitments meaningless, leading to the cancellation of the Geneva II meeting

and paving the way for the Normandy Format. Russia, in turn, leveraged the Geneva Statement to frame the conflict as an internal Ukrainian crisis, downplaying its own responsibility and exploiting diplomatic ambiguity to further its strategic objectives.

A framework of frustration: The Normandy Format and the stalled peace process in Ukraine

Following the collapse of the Geneva Format, the United States' reluctance to engage multilaterally, and Russian opposition to European Union involvement, a new mediation framework emerged: the Normandy Format. Initiated during the D-Day commemorations in France in June 2014, this grouping brought together leaders from France, Germany, Russia, and Ukraine. Within this framework, Russia positioned itself as a neutral mediator alongside Germany and France, effectively denying its direct involvement in the conflict.⁹ Notably, this self-portrayal was not formally challenged by either France or Germany, allowing Russia to maintain its narrative. Unlike the Geneva Format, however, the Normandy discussions excluded the United States, which opted to engage Russia through separate bilateral channels. This parallel approach weakened the West's ability to provide coherent support and exert pressure during pivotal moments in the negotiations.¹⁰

Despite its stated goal of achieving a peaceful resolution to the conflict in

Ukraine, the Normandy Format struggled to maintain momentum. Its effectiveness was undermined by infrequent meetings and extended periods of inactivity—the result of leadership transitions in France and Ukraine—coupled with a discernible lack of political will. Nevertheless, the Format achieved important milestones, including the creation of the TCG as the primary forum for resolving the conflict in Ukraine. Normandy's most significant breakthrough was the Minsk II agreement of February 2015, brokered at a high-level meeting following the collapse of its predecessor amid intense military clashes in contested areas.¹¹

Following a period of stalled progress, the Normandy Format summit in Paris on December 9, 2019, briefly revived hopes for diplomatic progress. This followed the election of President Zelensky, who campaigned on a platform advocating for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. While Zelensky and Putin reaffirmed their commitment to a cease-fire and troop withdrawals, fundamental disagreements continued to impede substantial progress. Zelensky rejected Putin's demand that Ukraine implement special status legislation and constitutional amendments for the Donbas region prior to holding elections, creating a diplomatic impasse. Chancellor Merkel subsequently rejected Zelensky's proposal to renegotiate the Minsk II agreement, which had made the restoration of Ukraine's control over its eastern border conditional on political reforms, effectively granting Russia significant lever-

age.¹² As a result, several critical issues remained unresolved, including the timing of elections, the extent of regional authority, and the status of armed separatists.

Beyond negotiation: The TCG's multifaceted role in conflict resolution

The TCG emerged in early June 2014 as a crucial platform for addressing the conflict in eastern Ukraine. First proposed by the CiO in a briefing to the UN Security Council on February 24, 2014, the TCG brought together senior representatives from the OSCE, Ukraine, and Russia to address a wide range of conflict-related issues. It operated on a continuous basis, convening frequently and often at short notice. Although the TCG evolved from informal discussions to a more organized structure, it never acquired a formal mandate or internal guidelines, creating operational uncertainty. In addition, the TCG's reliance on consensus effectively granted Russia veto power. Unlike the Normandy Format, where direct engagement with Ukraine was paramount, the TCG allowed for the direct participation of separatist representatives in both its meetings and its four working groups, granting them a voice and legitimizing their presence.¹³

Led by the OSCE, the TCG assisted in drafting and implementing specific elements of the Poroshenko peace plan, including facilitating direct engagement with separatist groups. It subsequently became closely associated with the Minsk

agreements and was both designated and internationally recognized as the official negotiating platform for conflict resolution efforts in Ukraine. In essence, the TCG's function extended beyond mere negotiation: it served as a facilitator of communication between all parties to the conflict, including the separatists, and played an indispensable role in resolving hostage crises and coordinating prisoner exchanges. Despite these contributions, the TCG's effectiveness was occasionally undermined by a lack of clearly defined communication channels with the Normandy Format. This coordination gap arose from the absence of formally established rules governing collaboration and information exchange between the two negotiation platforms.

The OSCE in Ukraine: Challenges to inclusive dialogue facilitation and monitoring

In response to the escalating crisis in Ukraine, the OSCE launched several dialogue support initiatives in 2014, including the National Dialogue Project (March–April 2014), the SMM (March 2014–February 2022), and the CiO-led high-level National Unity Roundtables (May 2014). The National Dialogue Project, initiated at the request of the Ukrainian government, aimed to mitigate deepening societal divisions exacerbated by the crisis. Implemented by the OSCE's Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine, this four-week initiative engaged a wide range

of stakeholders—including government institutions and various civil society actors—across key locations throughout the country. It sought to create an enabling environment for high-level roundtables, inclusive town hall meetings, and parliamentary engagement in each region. However, the rapidly deteriorating security situation ultimately limited the mission's impact and duration.

During the first half of 2014, the SMM played a crucial role in monitoring and reporting on the evolving social and security situation. Prior to receiving its ceasefire monitoring mandate from the TCG in September 2014, the SMM used dialogue as a tool for de-escalation, facilitating the peaceful transfer of occupied buildings, and establishing direct communication channels with protesters and occupiers.¹⁴ It also conducted extensive mapping exercises to identify and engage potential partners, contributing to the preparation of subsequent high-level roundtables. Nevertheless, the SMM's operations were frequently disrupted by security incidents—including the kidnapping of military observers, the abduction of an SMM patrol, and the downing of flight MH17 by separatists—which diverted resources and hindered its effectiveness.

The CiO-led high-level National Unity Roundtables, co-chaired by former Ukrainian Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, encountered significant challenges from the outset. Efforts to establish a planned Coordinating Council and to develop an OSCE-assisted code

of conduct for Roundtable participants were never realized. The initiative was further hampered by an unclear agenda, the controversial selection of participants, and the government's restrictive policy of engaging only with non-armed separatist groups.¹⁵ Ukraine faced the unenviable challenge of organizing an inclusive national dialogue involving individuals on its own wanted list while simultaneously conducting counterterrorism operations. Despite an amnesty offer aimed at persuading armed groups to disarm, the initiative collapsed after only three meetings.

The illusion of compromise: Why Poroshenko's peace initiative was doomed

President Poroshenko assumed office on June 7, 2014, with an uncompromising stance toward Moscow-backed separatists: "They don't represent anybody. We have to restore law and order and sweep the terrorists off the street."¹⁶ Following his election, Poroshenko faced a rapidly deteriorating security situation, especially in the Donbas. Separatist checkpoints and the occupation of government buildings proliferated, culminating in the proclamation of the so-called Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR). In response to the crisis, he proposed a comprehensive peace plan designed to restore Ukrainian sovereignty over the entirety of its territory.

Unveiled in late June 2014, Poroshenko's 15-point peace plan aligned broadly with the principles of the Geneva Statement. Developed with the help of the TCG, it emphasized a unilateral and temporary ceasefire and the establishment of a 10-kilometer buffer zone along the Ukrainian-Russian border. Further key elements included constitutional changes to support decentralization and early elections in Donbas. Concerns and questions persisted, however, particularly concerning the role of international organizations such as the OSCE in the plan's implementation.

The ceasefire lasted only ten days before Poroshenko terminated it, citing "more than a hundred" violations.¹⁷ The high number of casualties and Ukraine's continued loss of control over critical sections of the border with Russia highlighted the fragility of the peace plan and the obstacles to achieving lasting stability in the Donbas region. Regaining control over the eastern border quickly became a central point of contention in subsequent negotiations, as it was essential to Ukraine's ability to stem the flow of arms and mercenaries from Russia. Yet despite its failure, the plan's emphasis on dialogue, decentralization, and constitutional reforms laid the groundwork for future peace efforts, ultimately leading to the two Minsk agreements. It demonstrated that peaceful solutions were not only being pursued but also viewed as achievable, even in the face of a seemingly intractable conflict. In hindsight, however, it may also have been a strategic miscalcu-

lation in its failure to recognize the full extent of Putin's imperial ambitions.¹⁸

The Minsk agreements: A framework for peace or a tool for Russian influence?

In September 2014, the TCG facilitated the negotiation of the Minsk Protocol (also known as Minsk I), an initial attempt to address the conflict in eastern Ukraine through an agreement that included Ukraine, Russia, and the separatists.¹⁹ While the Protocol's twelve points incorporated most of Poroshenko's peace plan,²⁰ the Battle of Debaltseve in January 2015, which resulted in heavy Ukrainian losses, led to its collapse. In response, the Normandy leaders negotiated a follow-up agreement—Minsk II—on February 12, 2015.²¹ This second accord was more comprehensive and detailed than its predecessor, building on the provisions of Minsk I. Its key provisions included granting "special status" to the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR, thereby consolidating Russian political influence in Ukraine. An amnesty for certain armed groups, coupled with a failure to force insurgents to relinquish territorial gains, further tilted the agreement in favor of the separatists.

Nevertheless, the Minsk II agreement was endorsed by a joint declaration of the Normandy leaders, including the presidents of Russia and Ukraine.²² Notably, and later ignored by Moscow, the declaration reaffirmed full respect for Ukraine's

sovereignty and territorial integrity. At Russia's urging, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2202 (2015), which formally endorsed the Minsk II agreement. Though Western members offered reluctant support, the resolution called on all parties to fully implement the agreed-upon measures, including a comprehensive ceasefire. Russia subsequently weaponized Resolution 2202 to legitimize its position, arguing that the Minsk agreements now constituted binding obligations under international law.²³

The Minsk agreements were flawed due to asymmetrical commitments and disagreements over sequencing: Ukraine prioritized security, while Russia insisted on prior political concessions. The so-called Steinmeier Formula attempted to break the deadlock over the timing of the Donbas elections by granting the Donetsk and Luhansk regions temporary special status on election day, with permanent status contingent on verification by the OSCE. In addition, under Minsk II, Ukraine was required to implement decentralization measures before regaining control of its borders, giving Russia further leverage.

Though initially intended as a path to peace, the Steinmeier Formula gradually came to be viewed as a concession to Russia, igniting fierce nationalist opposition in Ukraine. The prospect of amnesty and autonomy for Russian-backed regions triggered widespread protests. As former Chancellor Merkel later recalled, ten thousand demonstrators in Kyiv chanted "No to capitulation! No to amnesty!"—directly targeting President Zelensky's

efforts to implement the Minsk agreements.²⁴ This determined opposition was also evident when Ukraine rescinded an invitation to German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier following Russia's 2022 invasion, underscoring the deep and emotional resistance to the Minsk agreements and the formula that bears his name.

A fragile watch: The SMM's limited impact on ceasefire implementation

The Minsk agreements entrusted SMM with a crucial role: monitoring and reporting on ceasefire compliance. Equipped with drones, SMM patrols observed and documented breaches, disseminating information to the OSCE Secretariat, the TCG, the OSCE Permanent Council, and the public through daily online reports. The SMM also monitored and verified weapons withdrawals and force disengagements.²⁵

To facilitate ceasefire implementation, the SMM provided liaison officers to the Joint Center for Control and Coordination (JCCC), established by Ukrainian and Russian General Staffs. In principle, the JCCC aimed to directly address ceasefire violations by enabling communication between senior officers and field commanders. In practice, however, its effectiveness was undermined due to the lack of direct interaction between Ukrainian and Russian officers, who communicated independently through the OSCE. This was further compounded by bureaucratic challenges, including the

use of tourist visas by Russian officers and the JCCC's lack of enforcement authority. While the JCCC occasionally succeeded in negotiating localized ceasefires for infrastructure repairs, it ultimately collapsed in 2017 when Russia withdrew, citing impediments to its personnel's work. The SMM was left to fill the resulting vacuum,²⁶ even though its relationship with the JCCC had never been clearly defined—a gap that ultimately weakened monitoring and de-escalation efforts.²⁷

The ceasefires established under the Minsk agreements were repeatedly violated, as fighting for territorial control continued unabated. As former Deputy Head of the SMM Alexander Hug observes, “the OSCE SMM did not report a single day during which no fire had been recorded.”²⁸ The consistent failure of the Minsk agreements to prevent ongoing conflict highlights a critical flaw: the insufficiency of relying on unenforced ceasefires. As a result, any future peace agreements must prioritize and implement security guarantees rather than repeating the ineffective formula of the Minsk process.

A significant limitation of the SMM stemmed from its adherence to strict impartiality, which precluded it from directly attributing ceasefire violations to specific parties. While SMM reports often employed coded language that strongly implied that pro-Russian separatists were primarily responsible for violations, this indirect approach hindered the establishment of clear accountability. While it lacked the authority and capacity for en-

forcement, the SMM's regular reporting provided essential transparency for the Ukrainian government and public, fostering a better understanding of the conflict dynamics.

Diplomatic illusions: The Minsk agreements and the road to war

In the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion, international crisis management efforts from 2014 to 2022 have come under scrutiny. Former Normandy Format members Angela Merkel and François Hollande have since acknowledged that the Minsk agreements bought Ukraine valuable time to strengthen its military capabilities and reinforce its defensive infrastructure.²⁹ Several political analysts have argued that Russia strategically leveraged the Minsk agreements to exert pressure on Ukraine, systematically undermining its sovereignty. This view has fueled criticism of perceived “Western complicity,” with many contending that by legitimizing Russia's role in the Minsk negotiations, Western powers unwittingly created an environment that enabled the 2022 escalation.³⁰

In a telling omission, the Geneva Statement, the OSCE Roadmap, and the Minsk agreements remained silent on Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea. From the outset, there were widespread doubts about Russia's sincerity in implementing the Minsk framework. Moscow portrayed itself as a neutral mediator while simultaneously supporting separatist movements

in eastern Ukraine—a contradiction that deepened suspicions.³¹ These doubts were further reinforced by Russia’s controversial “passportization” policy in the Donbas. By issuing Russian passports to residents of the region, Moscow was able to claim it was defending its “citizens” in Donbas, establishing a pretext for future military interventions. Simultaneously, it insisted that Ukraine negotiate directly with separatists, many of which were Russian veterans, while framing the conflict as a Ukrainian civil war in which Russia was serving merely as a third-party arbitrator.

In contrast to the Istanbul Communiqué of March 2022 and anticipated future peace deals, which involve “land for peace” concessions, the Minsk agreements were based on a “political influence for peace” model.³² Unlike the 2022 negotiations, this framework focused on immediate ceasefire arrangements and Russian *droit de regard* over a federalized Donbas, emphasizing regional subsidiarity over comprehensive geopolitical changes. While Ukraine viewed the Minsk process as a path toward restoring its territorial integrity—even if that meant granting amnesty to separatists and regional autonomy to Donbas—Russia used it as a tool for transforming Ukraine into a “Russian satellite.”³³ As Ukrainian scholar Serhii Plokhly notes, the “special status” provision for Donetsk and Luhansk was less about decentralization and more about creating a Russian-controlled enclave within Ukraine in the Donbas regions.³⁴ This was essentially a strategic

blueprint for maintaining Moscow’s grip on Ukraine’s internal affairs, effectively stalling its progress toward full sovereignty and Western integration, including NATO membership. Until 2021, Russia maintained that the Minsk agreements were the only viable solution to the conflict, asserting that there was “no alternative.”³⁵ At that time, in the eyes of Normandy members, “Minsk was dead in the water.”³⁶ This failure ultimately served as an excuse for the full-scale Russian invasion on February 24, 2022.³⁷

Though widely and ardently criticized by many Ukrainians, the Minsk agreements were viewed by some analysts as a potential means of averting a full-scale Russian invasion in 2022. While speculative, this perspective underscores the difficult trade-offs faced by Ukraine. The full implementation of the agreements would have required significant concessions, such as granting special status to separatist-controlled regions and curbing Ukraine’s NATO ambitions. Nevertheless, some argue that these compromises, however painful, may have been the necessary cost of avoiding a far more catastrophic conflict.³⁸ The notion that Russia, driven by its geopolitical ambitions, may have always intended to invade Ukraine regardless of the diplomatic outcome serves as a cautionary guardrail for this study.

Conclusions and recommendations

The crisis in Ukraine prior to February 2022 exposed fundamental weaknesses in

international crisis management. Despite extensive diplomatic efforts, the failure to prevent Russia's full-scale invasion revealed a lack of genuine political will and the absence of effective institutional enforcement mechanisms. The Yanukovich government's rejection of OSCE involvement in late 2013—a pivotal moment and missed opportunity—laid bare the pressing need for strengthened early warning frameworks and a more dynamic, forward-leaning approach to conflict mediation, ultimately foreshadowing the disastrous consequences of inaction. A further challenge was the lack of coordination between key institutions and platforms, including the OSCE, the Normandy Format, and the TCG. The relationship between the JCCC and the SMM also remained unresolved, based on ad hoc arrangements. The failure to establish clear information-sharing protocols and defined implementation responsibilities weakened crisis management efforts.

The collapse of the JCCC in Ukraine highlights both the importance of structured military-to-military communication for ceasefire management and the risks associated with limited interaction and reliance on external actors, pointing to the need for a more robust, transparent mechanism for future conflict resolution efforts.³⁹

The failure of the Minsk agreements ultimately resulted from their built-in ambiguities, which led to persistent disputes over implementation and a lack of political commitments. While the Steinmeier Formula was intended to provide clari-

ty, it faced resistance, demonstrating that sustainable peace processes require both national ownership and enforceable commitments. Germany and France's cautious approach to confronting Russia in the Normandy Format, a strategically limited US role, and an ineffective OSCE presence proved fatally inadequate; the absence of a robust peacekeeping mission capable of enforcement, coupled with a critical lack of credible multilateral security guarantees and military deterrence, left Ukraine vulnerable, ultimately fueled Russian coercive behavior, and prolonged the conflict.

Russia's self-portrayal as a neutral mediator was inherently deceptive, eroding trust from the beginning. Ukraine's reluctance to negotiate directly with armed separatists, though politically justified, narrowed potential diplomatic avenues, while Russia's strategic manipulation of separatism demonstrated how hybrid warfare can be used as a tool to maintain instability.

The Poroshenko peace plan and the Minsk agreements demonstrate that passive diplomatic frameworks are inadequate and that active enforcement is essential. The TCG, whose efforts extended beyond mediation, stands out in this regard. Its four working groups addressed the full spectrum of conflict management, highlighting its critical role in crisis resolution.

Russia's exploitation of the Minsk process to justify its full-scale invasion marked a fundamental failure of deterrence, reflecting not just a breakdown in

negotiations but a broader inability to counter Russia's strategic ambitions. As former Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba warned: "Any hypothetical 'Minsk-3' can have only one result: an even bloodier war."⁴⁰

The Ukrainian crisis compels us to acknowledge the urgent need to strengthen conflict resolution institutions such as the OSCE and other relevant international bodies. Such institutions must be empowered to promote compliance with agreements, credibly monitor ceasefires, and address the root causes of conflict. In contrast to the SMM's limitations, future monitoring mechanisms must clearly attribute ceasefire violations while maintaining impartiality.

A sustainable peace in Ukraine and elsewhere requires a multi-dimensional approach that goes beyond ceasefires. Key elements must include sustained diplomatic engagement and legally binding security guarantees. One option could be a legally binding version of the Budapest Memorandum, possibly endorsed by a UN Security Council resolution. Additional pillars include military risk reduction through verifiable arms control, economic reconstruction to ensure long-term resilience, and the establishment of a comprehensive, structured European security dialogue, underpinned by a reaffirmation of the Helsinki Principles and OSCE commitments. Such a dialogue must address not only the immediate conflict but also systemic regional instability by laying the foundations for a security architecture based on sovereignty, ter-

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What Role for the OSCE in Addressing the Security Risks of Climate Change?

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Abstract

Since the 2010s, there has been a growing recognition that the impacts of climate change on resources and livelihoods exacerbate instability, conflict, and human suffering. This recognition has permeated various levels and sectors, from national security and foreign policy to international organizations such as the OSCE. This paper examines the role of the OSCE in mitigating climate-related security risks, emphasizing its capacity to enhance dialogue and cooperation among its fifty-seven participating States. It illustrates how addressing the security implications of climate change requires comprehensive regional strategies. By detailing both past and present OSCE initiatives to integrate climate and security considerations into its programming, it demonstrates how the OSCE facilitates collaboration across borders, sectors, and governance levels within diverse political landscapes, thereby enhancing the trust and cooperation necessary for addressing climate risks to security. The analysis underscores the importance of participatory processes and cross-sector collaboration to scale up climate action. It also highlights the necessity of keeping climate issues high on the global agenda, especially amid rising geopolitical tensions.

Keywords

Climate change, security, cooperation, dialogue

To cite this publication: Alina Viehoff and Raquel Munayer, “What Role for the OSCE in Addressing the Security Risks of Climate Change?,” in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Nomos, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748960751-03>

Introduction

Climate change has rapidly risen in priority on both national and international security and foreign policy agendas. A key factor driving this development is the growing recognition that climate change poses significant security threats. With issues such as dwindling natural resources and unstable livelihoods emerg-

ing as contributing factors to conflicts and human suffering, the role that climate change plays in adding to these challenges is difficult to ignore. The impacts of climate change—whether forest fires, glacial lake outburst floods, or climate-induced migration and displacement—are rarely confined to a country’s political borders. To avoid, prepare for, and respond to these disruptions, it is therefore essential that countries approach climate and security issues from a regional perspective,

* adelphi research

collaborating on strategies and actions to address short- and long-term climate-related security risks. The identification of shared climate challenges and their impacts, as well as the development of effective solutions to address them, relies heavily on cooperation¹—between governments, local and international organizations, civil society, the private sector, and those most impacted by climate change.²

Because of the transboundary nature of climate-related security risks, security institutions and organizations such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC),³ NATO,⁴ and the OSCE⁵ have increasingly integrated climate change into their agendas. As Anniek Barnhoorn observes, this integration has been taking place in several dimensions, from discursive framing to institutional design and policy action, albeit in distinct ways and to varying extents within each organizational context.⁶

To better understand what role security organizations can play in addressing climate-related security risks, this paper examines the OSCE as a case study. Building on prior research by Bremberg on the OSCE and diplomatic practices in the field of climate-related security,⁷ it explores the broader implementation of the climate-security nexus within the OSCE framework. The analysis investigates how climate change impacts intersect with the OSCE's mandate and comprehensive approach to security and identifies opportunities to address climate-related security challenges through its programming. Fo-

cus is given to the OSCE's experience as a platform for dialogue, which is a crucial entry point for tackling climate-related security risks. We highlight lessons that have emerged from past and current OSCE activities on addressing these risks and outline recommendations for enhancing the mainstreaming of climate change in the Organization's work.

Taking stock: Climate change and security in the OSCE

Climate change and security

In the climate change and security context, security is understood not only in its traditional sense—relating to violence, conflict, and wars—but also more broadly as human security, which touches upon economic, environmental, and sociopolitical dimensions. It encompasses issues such as access to food, water, shelter, and livelihoods, as well as weak governance and related political instability—all of which can impact wellbeing.⁸ Therefore, climate-related security refers to the risks that climate change poses to security, both in the traditional and in the human security sense.⁹ This understanding aligns with the OSCE's approach to security as a broad, comprehensive, and cooperative issue that is expressed across its three dimensions: politico-military, economic and environmental, and human.¹⁰

Climate-related security risks can impact all three OSCE dimensions through different pathways and to varying degrees.

One such intersection concerns competition over natural resources, both in the form of intercommunal disputes over water and land access and use and in the form of diplomatic tensions between neighboring countries in the context of transboundary resource sharing.¹¹ In Central Asia, for example, transboundary water management is a particularly sensitive issue due to conflicting priorities between upstream and downstream countries.¹² These tensions are further compounded by inherited Soviet-era infrastructure and legal frameworks, which were not designed for the specific purpose of cross-border water sharing.¹³ Another key front where climate and security concerns converge is food and livelihood insecurity. When climate change impacts livelihoods, it disturbs socioeconomic dynamics that are crucial for stability, especially in contexts where affected populations, and particularly vulnerable communities, lack alternatives or social safety nets.¹⁴ In Armenia's Lori Province, for example, nearly half the working population is engaged in agriculture, leaving the area's food and livelihood security highly vulnerable to climate impacts on crops, livestock, and essential infrastructure.¹⁵ In some cases, these pressures have led people to resort to maladaptive coping strategies that further exacerbate both climate and security risks.¹⁶ In South-Eastern Europe, for example, climate-induced stress on agriculture and tourism has aggravated employment and economic insecurity. This, in turn, has driven unsustainable

livelihood practices such as illegal logging and hunting.¹⁷

These examples highlight some of the ways in which climate change can interact with and exacerbate insecurity. Additional factors such as age, gender, and ethnicity also play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between climate change and security. Climate-related security risks do not affect all populations equally or proportionally.¹⁸ Moreover, the risks vary greatly depending on the context. This variation reflects not only the uneven distribution of climate impacts across the world but also preexisting conflict dynamics and differing levels of social and economic resilience to external shocks.¹⁹

The context-specific nature of climate-related security risks underscores the important role that regional organizations such as the OSCE play in addressing them. With fifty-seven participating States, and encompassing a large portion of the Northern Hemisphere, the OSCE is in a unique position to identify and respond to climate-related security risks affecting its participating States and, by extension, regional stability.²⁰ Its track record of managing heterogeneity through the promotion of dialogue between states with different—often opposing—political views, priorities, and realities makes it well positioned to support the establishment of the trust and cooperation needed to address climate-related security risks comprehensively and effectively.²¹

Past and present OSCE engagement

In the realm of security, the OSCE has been a forerunner in integrating climate considerations into its agenda. As early as the 1970s, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)—the OSCE’s predecessor—recognized the importance of cooperation on environmental issues as part of its comprehensive approach to peace and security.²² In 1997, the OSCE further institutionalized the environmental dimensions of security with the establishment of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) within the OSCE Secretariat.²³

Subsequently, a more comprehensive approach to environment and security emerged, drawing in part on the expertise generated under the Environment and Security (ENVSEC) initiative. Launched in 2003 in cooperation with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), ENVSEC focused on addressing environmental security risks by increasing cooperation on environmental issues both within and between countries in Eastern Europe, South-Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.²⁴

Since the late 2000s, the OSCE has adopted a more explicit focus on climate change by recognizing it as a long-term challenge with the potential to amplify existing security risks.²⁵ In parallel, the OSCE and its participating States

have emphasized the need to enhance disaster risk reduction by increasing climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts.²⁶ Through its activities under the ENVSEC initiative, the OSCE has focused on raising awareness of the security challenges related to climate change and identifying pathways for mitigation.²⁷ For instance, leveraging the 2012 Dniester River Basin Treaty between Moldova and Ukraine, which was endorsed and ratified with the support of the initiative for sustainable management of the transboundary ecosystem, ENVSEC facilitated the development of a joint climate adaptation strategy.²⁸ This effort ultimately led to the securing of funding for follow-up activities from the Global Environment Facility.²⁹

The 2021 Ministerial Decision Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change marked a pivotal moment in the OSCE’s engagement with environmental and climate-related issues. This decision explicitly mandates the OSCE to mainstream climate change and related security risks across its work and institutional entities. The political framework also calls on participating States to enhance dialogue and cooperation, emphasizing collective efforts in joint research, investments, and disaster risk reduction and management to build resilience. It positions the OSCE as a platform for sharing information and good practices while recognizing that collaboration on these matters can also be an entry point for “building mutual confidence and promoting

good neighbourly relations.³⁰ This step represents the first unanimous recognition of climate change as a standalone security risk at the highest political level within the Organization.³¹ It emerged amid escalating geopolitical tensions resulting from Russia's increasingly aggressive foreign policy,³² at a time when similar attempts within the UNSC had failed.³³

To put the Ministerial Decision into action and provide a platform for dialogue on climate-related security issues, the OSCE has funded a range of dedicated projects to strengthen climate resilience, adaptation, and mitigation for peace and security across its participating States, led by the OCEEA and implemented in collaboration with OSCE field operations, as well as national and international partners.³⁴ Such activities encompass internal capacity-development measures for field operations, focusing on integrating climate considerations into their work by designing and implementing climate-sensitive programming.³⁵ This also supports field operations in conducting their own capacity-development activities with relevant target groups in participating States. Another priority has been fostering networking and exchange among young people through regional youth conferences and summer schools centered on climate change and security.³⁶ The OSCE has also initiated a long-term climate and security consultation process in South-Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus involving a wide range of stakeholders and sectors at the local, regional,

and international level. Building on these consultations, the OSCE, in cooperation with adelphi, has developed strategies to mitigate identified climate-related security risks across borders.³⁷ The final and ongoing step of this multi-stage process focuses on selecting and implementing pilot adaptation activities from the strategies in each region.³⁸

The launch of the Climate and Security Fund by German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock during the OSCE High-Level Conference on Climate Change in 2023 marks another significant institutional milestone in better addressing climate-related security issues within the Organization.³⁹ This dedicated financial mechanism will enable the OSCE to finance more projects and systematically enhance its climate and security portfolio moving forward.

Lessons from mainstreaming climate change and security

This section presents several insights drawn from the OSCE's experience in addressing climate and security challenges across its programs and activities.⁴⁰

Facilitating dialogue, joint understanding, and solutions

The OSCE offers a platform for participating States to discuss climate-related security risks, fosters a shared understanding of these risks, and encourages the

development of joint solutions. At the political level, the OSCE's convening power can facilitate consensus building and mobilize climate action among participating States through exchange formats such as conferences and summer schools,⁴¹ and the adoption of ministerial decisions.⁴² However, the need for consensus can sometimes mean that politically sensitive issues, as well as concrete language on intergovernmental cooperation, are excluded from the agenda altogether. As a result, operational texts in ministerial decisions tend to adopt softer language—emphasizing the “recognition” of problems, the “promotion” of solutions, and “invitations” to act rather than explicit commitments.⁴³

At the operational level, however, the OSCE is able to adopt a more practical and concrete approach, particularly since many of its activities are funded through extrabudgetary means and do not require political consensus. This enables the OSCE to initiate joint analyses on the links between climate change and security, prioritize challenges and geographical areas, and identify opportunities to address them collaboratively across borders.⁴⁴ In South-Eastern Europe, for example, the OSCE conducted an assessment of climate change and security hotspots, which informed consultations with regional stakeholders from various governmental sectors, civil society, and experts. These consultations identified the Shar/Šara Mountains and Korab Massif area as a key region for cooperation.⁴⁵ Together, participating stakeholders de-

veloped joint adaptation measures to tackle climate-related security challenges in the area, focusing on forest governance, sustainable livelihoods, and infrastructure development. These measures also created broader opportunities for cooperation, such as the establishment of transboundary working groups and study tours.⁴⁶ By creating space for dialogue based on sound analysis and science, the OSCE was able to bring together stakeholders from different countries and sectors, encouraging dialogue, exchange, and joint action.

Supporting cooperation across sectors and levels

Addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges emerging from climate change requires a comprehensive and integrated policy approach.⁴⁷ In response, the OSCE has brought together actors from a wide range of sectors—including security, disaster risk reduction, agriculture, tourism, and the environment—to improve cooperation around climate adaptation and resilience.⁴⁸ This work involves actors from different levels of governance, from local municipalities to national governments, regional bodies, and international organizations. As part of the OSCE's climate-security project,⁴⁹ this multi-level and multi-sectoral approach has generated project ideas that cut across disciplines, ranging from community-level awareness-raising initiatives to the development of intergovernmental coordination frameworks. In

Central Asia, for instance, proposed activities include developing climate-smart villages to support the sustainable livelihoods of mountain communities, involving young people in glacial monitoring and science, and establishing regional policy approaches to human mobility and climate adaptation.⁵⁰ By leveraging its mandate across economic, governance, and environmental issues, the OSCE is uniquely positioned to facilitate cooperation both within and between countries' governance sectors. This support is crucial for developing integrated and coordinated policy portfolios capable of addressing the impacts of climate change.

Bridging political divides

The OSCE's efforts to address climate-related security risks are typically embedded in highly sensitive and complex political contexts. In many participating States, long-standing border disputes—rooted in the establishment of new states following the dissolution of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia—have deeply shaped policies and societies, giving rise to inter-state animosities that are difficult to break through.⁵¹ Nonetheless, although it has struggled amid rising geopolitical tensions, the OSCE has demonstrated an enduring ability to bring countries together. With a participation that continues to span the political East-West divide, the OSCE is one of the few organizations outside the UN with the ability to convene conflicting parties under one umbrella.

This was exemplified by the 2021 Ministerial Decision, which demonstrated participating States' willingness to cooperate on challenges related to climate change. Since then, however, tensions have escalated, further complicating the environment in which the OSCE operates.

Despite these rising tensions, the Organization can leverage its second dimension—particularly its work on climate-related security risks—as a bargaining chip for advancing dialogue and cross-border cooperation, even in the most complex of contexts. By shifting the focus away from political strife and toward common issues that can only be solved through collaborative action, such as transboundary resource management, the OSCE can create openings for constructive engagement. Its strong presence at the local level allows it to design context-specific interventions, examples of which include bringing together municipal leaders from the Armenia-Georgia⁵² and Azerbaijan-Georgia border regions to discuss cooperation on managing transboundary wildfire risks.⁵³ In this way, addressing climate-related security risks not only falls within the OSCE's mandate but also serves as a means of achieving its broader goal of promoting security, stability, and regional cooperation.

Conclusion and recommendations

The climate crisis cuts across many areas, defies political borders, and requires action from all sectors—including the

security sector. With a clear mandate on security matters and a strong presence on the ground through its field operations, the OSCE can engage directly in contexts where these risks emerge. Its further mandate around cooperation means that transboundary issues in particular fall within its remit. Moreover, the OSCE's multidimensional approach to security means that addressing risks from non-traditional security threats also falls squarely within its scope.⁵⁴ The OSCE's past and ongoing integration of climate change and security into its programming demonstrates its potential to address climate-related security risks effectively and serves as a focal point for coordinated action across its participating States. These efforts also offer valuable lessons and guidance for other security organizations seeking to leverage their mandates and programming to tackle climate challenges. As climate change and security issues continue to intensify globally, the OSCE will need to scale up its engagement to drive concrete changes.

Deepen and expand participatory engagement. Looking ahead, the OSCE should capitalize and expand on the opportunities arising from mainstreaming climate change and security to enhance climate action. This commitment is vital to keeping climate issues at the forefront of regional and global agendas, particularly amid escalating international tensions. Identifying shared climate and environmental risks—and working collaboratively toward solutions—can also foster trust among stakeholders, paving the way

for further engagement and cooperation in other areas as well.⁵⁵ The newly established Climate and Security Fund can play a pivotal role in this regard by enabling sustained action on the ground through dedicated climate and security programs and projects. To ensure relevance and sustainability, however, it is essential that these investments support initiatives that are co-designed with regional stakeholders—including civil society and affected communities—and are aligned with existing efforts, frameworks, priorities, and needs.⁵⁶

Support the transition from analysis to action. In addition to addressing climate-related security risks and improving cooperation on environmental challenges, the strategies and pilot projects initiated by the OSCE can also serve as blueprints and starting points for larger, more coordinated, and longer-term efforts by other actors across the OSCE area. Successfully implementing these activities will require an integrated approach that engages diverse actors with a broad range of technical expertise across various sectors and levels. By facilitating consultations, developing strategic frameworks, and piloting measures, the OSCE can play a pivotal role in fostering collaboration and driving further action. Moreover, it can function as an effective intermediary, forging connections between international organizations and key regional and national stakeholders. The successful partnership between the OSCE, the UN, and the Global Environment Facility in the Dniester

River Basin offers a model for this type of cooperation.

While awareness of climate-related security risks has grown over the past decades, practical experience in addressing these risks through programming—transitioning from risk analysis to concrete, collaborative action on the ground—remains limited.⁵⁷ The OSCE's efforts in mainstreaming climate and security can help bridge this gap. To achieve this, it is essential to monitor and evaluate both past and ongoing initiatives. Sharing insights on how climate change intersects with security—and highlighting effective strategies for tackling these challenges—can contribute to empirical learning in this emerging field.⁵⁸

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Enhancing OSCE Support for Security Sector Reform: Lessons from Gender-Based Violence Response in Ukraine and Mali

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Abstract

Security Sector Reform (SSR) is critical to building inclusive, accountable security institutions. This paper examines how the OSCE can strengthen its SSR approach by integrating lessons from efforts to address gender-based violence (GBV) and conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV). Drawing on DCAF’s 2024 field research in Ukraine and Mali, it analyses how pre-conflict GBV capacity-building shaped security and justice institutions’ readiness to address CRSV when conflict escalated. Ukraine’s experience demonstrates the dividends of gender-responsive SSR delivered with national ownership and close civil society engagement. Mali’s case highlights the limits of externally driven reforms in contexts lacking institutional resilience. The paper distills strategic lessons for the OSCE’s approach to SSR around survivor-centered practices, civil society partnership, shaping values and attitudes, and institutionalization. Amid political resistance to gender equality work in some participating States, the findings offer both encouragement and caution on how the OSCE can sustain and scale progress.

Keywords

SSR, CRSV, Ukraine, gender

To cite this publication: Megan Bastick, “Enhancing OSCE Support for Security Sector Reform: Lessons from Gender-Based Violence Response in Ukraine and Mali,” in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Nomos, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748960751-05>

Introduction

The OSCE affirms gender equality, women’s rights, and women’s empowerment as essential elements of comprehensive security, even in the face of long-standing resistance by some participating States to gender concepts and language. Support for gender-responsive security sector reform

(SSR) has been a hallmark of OSCE efforts to promote gender equality, connected at the policy level to implementing the broader Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. OSCE entities have particularly prioritized strengthening police and justice responses to gender-based violence (GBV) and boosting women’s participation in the security sector. The use of sexual violence against Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war by Russian forces has garnered OSCE condemnation and reinvigorated

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attention to security sector responses to conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV).¹

Efforts to address CRSV are an important priority for SSR and good security sector governance in conflict-affected contexts. Indeed, early scholarship on CRSV has shown that strong systems of accountability and control within armed forces and police reduce the likelihood of sexual violence.² Capacity-building for law enforcement and justice system practitioners is underscored in key normative instruments for addressing CRSV, such as the UN Security Council's resolutions on WPS and SSR,³ and in regional mechanisms, including the EU's Strategic Approach to WPS. This is not to suggest that SSR alone is sufficient to effectively address CRSV: as will be evident in this analysis, CRSV victim/survivors face deep structural, social, and psychological barriers to reporting and justice, even within reformed security systems.

A foundational assumption of SSR support in the security and justice sector is that building institutional capacity for violence prevention and response in peacetime will enable the security sector to protect civilians more effectively during times of armed conflict or escalating violence. More specifically, in terms of gender-responsive SSR, policy planning—including that of the OSCE—presupposes that where a country's police, military, and justice sectors have been sensitized to gender inequality and GBV prior to a conflict, they will be more willing and able to prevent and respond to CRSV, in-

cluding by supporting survivors to safely report violations and access justice.⁴

While the link between gender-responsive SSR and improved responses to CRSV may seem self-evident, there is scant field-based analysis to substantiate it. This paper confronts this gap, asking: to what extent does pre-conflict GBV capacity-building within security and justice institutions prepare them to respond to CRSV in wartime, and how can the OSCE use these insights to advance gender-responsive SSR?

To answer this question, this paper draws primarily on a 2024 DCAF study in Ukraine and Mali.⁵ DCAF's research examined the impact of gender equality and GBV capacity-building in the police and justice sector on subsequent action and response concerning CRSV. Capacity development activities included training, as well as external expert support for the development of policies, practices, and curricula and the dissemination of research and analysis. The cases explore contrasting contexts, with Mali representing a fragmented, externally supported SSR environment and Ukraine characterized by greater national ownership and continuity of institutional development. Analyzing the divergent findings offers OSCE actors insights into effective approaches to strengthening security sector responses to GBV and, more broadly, enhancing SSR support.

After setting out the methodology of the DCAF study, this paper reviews OSCE commitments and practice on gender equality, gender-responsive SSR, and

CRSV. It then presents the Ukraine and Mali case studies, drawing on these findings to develop recommendations for how the OSCE can embed survivor-centered, culturally aware, and civil society-anchored approaches in its SSR programming. It concludes by reflecting on how the OSCE can sustain progress amid political resistance to gender work.

Methodology

The DCAF research that informs this analysis was conducted in 2024 with support from the Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs as part of a broader portfolio of research examining how good security sector governance and SSR contribute to stability and development. Ukraine and Mali were selected as case studies because SSR initiatives in both contexts between 2017 and 2022—before the escalation of conflict—had explicitly prioritized gender equality and GBV.

The research methodology combined a desk review of legal frameworks, policy documents, and SSR program reports with qualitative data collection and expert consultation. In Ukraine, partner organization JurFem carried out eleven semi-structured interviews with prosecutors, judicial trainers, lawyers, and NGO experts. In Mali, DCAF's Bamako office, together with local consultants, conducted seven interviews with police, gendarmerie, and NGO representatives and administered a survey to seventeen police and gendarmerie personnel. Given

the stigma and security challenges facing victim/survivors of CRSV, the study did not seek to engage directly with them. Instead, it relied on institutional informants and civil society perspectives. The study is also limited in temporal scope, offering only a snapshot of progress and challenges in mid-2024.

Gender-responsive SSR: OSCE concepts, commitments, and engagement

Normative frameworks, political resistance

The OSCE's commitment to gender-responsive SSR stems from its Charter for European Security, adopted at the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999. This document committed participating States to “making equality between men and women an integral part of [their] policies, both at the level of [their] States and within the Organization”—a commitment that has been further developed through successive Gender Action Plans. The 2004 Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality remains the central reference document. It commits to mainstream a gender perspective into OSCE activities, policies, programs, and projects, including in the politico-military dimension, and explicitly recognizes gender equality and gender-mainstreaming in the OSCE area as essential to comprehensive security. In the two decades since its adoption, successive Ministerial Council and

Permanent Council decisions have further reiterated OSCE commitments toward gender equality and developed the OSCE's mandate to support participating States in preventing violence against women. These include the Ministerial Council Decision on Women in Conflict Prevention, Crisis Management and Post-Conflict Rehabilitation, which brought the WPS Agenda into the OSCE, the Ministerial Council Decisions on Women's Participation in Political and Public Life and Elements of the Conflict Cycle, and the three Ministerial Council Decisions on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women.⁶ Work within the framework of the WPS Agenda in particular has focused OSCE attention to gender in the politico-military dimension, including arms control, border management, conflict prevention and resolution, counterterrorism, policing, and SSR.⁷

Even in 2005, when the OSCE integrated WPS into its policy framework, there was resistance to gender issues making their way into the politico-military dimension. The Holy See and Russia have blocked efforts to update the 2004 Gender Action Plan or adopt a regional action plan for WPS implementation.⁸ Since the early 2020s, opposition to gender equality efforts has spread. In some participating States, senior political figures have fomented narratives portraying gender equality as part of an ideology imposed by foreign actors that threatens family values and national identity.⁹ In the most recent annual report of the OSCE's progress on gender equality, the Secretary General

called out "a worrying backslide in women's rights accompanied by an increase in misogyny and discrimination."¹⁰ Gender equality is now widely regarded by OSCE staff as "politically sensitive."¹¹

Yet resistance has not meant stagnation. Despite these sensitivities, the OSCE has been implementing strong gender-targeted projects with tangible results. The Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme has advanced ambitious initiatives, most notably the extrabudgetary Women and Men Innovating and Networking for Gender Equality (WIN) project, which has created networks of women peacebuilders and strengthened gender-sensitive approaches to mediation and community security.¹² Several Chairpersons have prioritized WPS, organizing high-level events. The OSCE WPS Roadmap, launched in May 2025 under the Finnish OSCE Chairpersonship, represents an important innovation.¹³ While itself non-binding, it sets out a menu of seventeen high-level "optional actions" to which participating States are encouraged to pledge. The Roadmap is a mechanism for revitalizing the OSCE's work in the area of WPS, showing how, while consensus remains blocked, innovation and progress are ongoing at both the political and the programmatic level.

OSCE institutions and gender-responsive SSR

The OSCE has been integral to shaping the concept of gender-responsive SSR in

multilateral policy, in particular through collaboration with DCAF and the UN from 2006 onwards to develop the Gender and SSR Toolkit and, later, the 2019 Gender and Security Toolkit.¹⁴ These guidance documents describe gender-responsive SSR as an approach that integrates gender perspectives and promotes gender equality throughout. Gender-responsive SSR involves ensuring that security institutions, policies, practices, and oversight mechanisms recognize and respond to the security needs and priorities of women, men, girls, and boys and that women's participation and leadership in security institutions and decision-making processes are promoted and supported. These changes require transformation of gendered power relations within the security sector through challenging discriminatory norms and addressing the institutional and societal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and exclusion. This, in turn, requires shifts not only in policy but in institutional culture, leadership accountability, and incentive structures. The OSCE's guidelines for its structures and staff on SSR and security sector governance outline commitments and entry points for strengthening gender equality across all of its dimensions.¹⁵

OSCE institutions have developed distinct but complementary roles in advancing gender-responsive SSR, often within the framework of supporting the implementation of WPS national action plans. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), operating within the human dimension, has

been at the forefront, producing training and guidance materials for the security sector, capacity-building on WPS principles and GBV response, supporting women's associations within law enforcement, and advising on measures to enhance the recruitment of women, introduce family-friendly policies, and address harassment and discriminatory norms. The Conflict Prevention Centre has likewise supported women's networks in the security sector. The Transnational Threats Department has supported training on gender-responsive border management and, through the Strategic Police Matters Unit, training cadets on victim-centered approaches to GBV. OSCE missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Ukraine, and Central Asia have likewise demonstrated the Organization's capacity to convene expert exchanges, deliver capacity development, and provide advisory support to SSR in ways that enhance GBV response and promote women's participation in the security sector. The Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme provides organization-wide coordination. While much of its work focuses on supporting women's civil society and gender-sensitive peacebuilding, it also supports gender capacity-building of security institutions and the development of training standards.

The OSCE's experience with gender-responsive SSR support reveals both strengths and limitations. Its long-term field presences allow for sustained engagement rather than short-term projects, and its multidimensional approach en-

ables linkages between SSR, human rights, and development. Its partnerships with civil society organizations (CSOs) bring local legitimacy and expertise. With that said, gender expertise in field operations is often underfunded and overstretched, gender projects remain heavily dependent on extrabudgetary funding, and reporting has tended to be descriptive rather than evaluative.¹⁶ The recent WPS Roadmap can be seen as strengthening OSCE institutions' mandate to prioritize support for gender-responsive SSR, explicitly encouraging the Secretariat and institutions to develop standards for mainstreaming gender equality in SSR.

OSCE institutions and CRSV

CRSV has been an implicit priority in the OSCE's strategic approach to gender equality, with the 2004 Action Plan recommending that OSCE participating States "[s]upport national and international efforts to bring to justice those who have perpetrated crimes against women which under applicable rules of international law are recognized as war crimes or crimes against humanity," alongside a commitment to further assisting participating States in reacting to sexual violence offenses.¹⁷ The 2014 Ministerial Council Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women took note of international and regional initiatives to combat sexual violence.¹⁸ It tasked the OSCE with assisting participat-

ing States in combatting sexual violence against women and to better responding to the needs of all victim/survivors, with a strong emphasis on investigation and prosecution.

Through initiatives such as the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) project, the OSCE has developed a training manual on preventing and responding to GBV during conflict and in post-conflict settings.¹⁹ The OSCE Secretariat has also issued gender guidance for military personnel in peace support operations to prevent, detect, and respond to CRSV. Several OSCE missions have directed their support to police, armed forces, and judicial institutions specifically to strengthen CRSV response. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, the OSCE trained police and members of the judiciary on CRSV investigation and prosecution and supported the introduction of survivor-sensitive procedures in courts. In Ukraine, as discussed below, CRSV has likewise been a distinct focus of OSCE support.

SSR approaches to CRSV in Ukraine and Mali

The 2024 DCAF study provides one of the first systematic examinations of whether pre-conflict investment in GBV-related capacity-building in security and justice institutions translates to improved responsiveness to CRSV during conflict. While it is to be expected that contexts as different as Ukraine and Mali will demonstrate different SSR outcomes, commonal-

ities remain when it comes to the factors that contribute to and hinder progress.

Ukraine

Beginning in 2017, international partners including the OSCE and DCAF implemented a series of initiatives to strengthen the capacity of Ukraine's police, prosecutors, and judicial institutions to respond to GBV. ODIHR, for example, trained police on GBV prevention and response, emphasizing survivor-centered responses and explicitly aiming to integrate gender perspectives into ongoing SSR. Through the WIN project, the OSCE trained State Emergency Services staff on gender-sensitive humanitarian response. The DCAF study emphasizes the cumulative effects of such support, which include legislative changes, the development of training curricula, the creation of specialized units, and structured partnerships with CSOs.

SSR support—including through the OSCE Support Programme for Ukraine—assisted key institutions such as the Office of the Prosecutor General and judicial training centers in developing and implementing training programs on survivor-centered investigation and prosecution of sexual violence, including conflict-related forms. These programs were complemented by institutional reforms, including the development of protocols for handling GBV cases and the integration of GBV modules into regular professional development curricula. Ukraine's human rights and gender equality strategies and

National Action Plan on WPS provided a strategic framework that linked GBV and CRSV response explicitly to the responsibilities of security and justice actors.

Security sector and NGO informants noted that the GBV capacity-building programs supported by international organizations prior to the 2022 escalation of the armed conflict (and continued thereafter) significantly contributed to the speed and effectiveness of implementing survivor-centered approaches to CRSV response. Specialists in the Office of the Prosecutor General, the National Police, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs who had undergone this training developed a deep understanding of GBV and the importance of adopting alternative approaches to investigation. They were better equipped to interview survivors, collect evidence, and coordinate with service providers. The Office of the Prosecutor General has developed a dedicated structure and specialized approaches to CRSV, paying attention to survivor-centered practices and the prevention of traumatization.

The central role of civil society was another key finding of the DCAF study. Organizations such as JurFem and La Strada, in part through being part of SSR support programs, had built capacity among state officials but also cultivated trusting relationships that enabled rapid collaboration when CRSV surged. Survivors' networks, often overlooked in SSR frameworks, also played a transformative role, with some survivors becoming trainers themselves, embedding lived experience

in professional practice. This aligns with wider scholarship emphasizing that survivor-centered justice processes are more effective when survivors are active participants rather than passive recipients.²⁰

Despite the CRSV frameworks in place in Ukraine, gaps and challenges remain. There is no comprehensive, coordinated nationwide policy on GBV prevention and response, and access to justice remains limited due to territorial distance from law enforcement agencies and courts, a lack of financial resources, and limited awareness of legal aid entitlements—particularly among Roma women, internally displaced persons, persons with disabilities, the elderly, people living with HIV, and women in rural and mountainous areas. Stigma is also a significant challenge. The general under-prosecution of sexual violence crimes likely translates to the under-prosecution of CRSV. Coordination between different CRSV service providers needs improving, especially for male survivors. The absence of a clear legal definition of CRSV in the Criminal Code has at times led to instances of war-related sexual violence being misclassified as ordinary crimes, resulting in weaker legal responses and sanctions.

Nevertheless, Ukraine's experience demonstrates that investing in GBV-related capacity within security institutions before the outbreak of conflict can enhance resilience and responsiveness. It also highlights the value of delivering international SSR support for GBV in partnership with local women's CSOs and gender experts, who are not only the most

credible authorities in their local contexts but also play a crucial role in sustaining and advancing the work when conflict escalates. Challenges to effective CRSV response in Ukraine underscore the importance of strong mechanisms for cooperation between state authorities, law enforcement agencies, CSOs, and other actors at the national and the regional level. At the same time, prosecutor sensitivity to survivor-centered approaches to CRSV has led local advocates to call for CRSV good practices to be applied across all forms of GBV, demonstrating the potential for a virtuous learning loop between CRSV response and wider gender-responsiveness in the security sector.

For the OSCE, Ukraine demonstrates the dividends of long-term investment. OSCE engagement in gender-responsive SSR in Ukraine—through police training, cooperation with judicial training centers, and support for legal reforms—has contributed to institutions that are ready and willing to respond to CRSV. With that said, the case underscores the need for ongoing support to expand the reach and inclusivity of security and justice mechanisms' responsiveness to GBV.

Mali

SSR initiatives in Mali following the 2012 crisis unfolded in an environment marked by significant challenges, including fragmented security institutions, entrenched patriarchal norms, and repeated political instability. Against this backdrop, from

2017 to 2022, international actors worked to build the capacity of the Malian police, gendarmerie, and armed forces to address GBV, including CRSV, through training and technical assistance. They also supported the development of a GBV action plan for the Malian police. In addition, DCAF supported the institutionalization of gender focal points within the Malian police and a gender committee within the gendarmerie, building capacity on gender and the handling of cases of GBV. It also supported the development of GBV training curricula and gender self-assessment processes.

Local informants and sources highlighted the positive impact of gender and GBV capacity-building on GBV response. Some CRSV-related institutional mechanisms have been put in place, including regional police CRSV focal points to support sensitization among personnel. However, CRSV is largely addressed within broader GBV frameworks, without differentiated services. A toll-free number for victim/survivors of GBV and CRSV has been created, and both the police and the gendarmerie have conducted sensitization efforts with communities. Informants reported a greater appetite to implement gender-related projects and activities, increased confidence among police and gendarmerie officers in identifying cases of GBV, engaging with victim/survivors, and operating referral mechanisms, and improved overall responsiveness to GBV, all of which have enhanced community trust in the security services. These are not insignificant

developments given the institutional and societal barriers that constrain reform in Mali.

Despite these advances, the DCAF study also highlights structural weaknesses that continue to mitigate the impact of SSR support. The gains achieved through GBV capacity-building in Mali have been limited by institutional shortcomings. International training was criticized for focusing on content without addressing how skills and knowledge could be applied and for failing to grapple with the chronic lack of resources and staff capacity. The new GBV policies and protocols were described as too dense and complicated for operational personnel to use effectively. Insufficient attention has also been paid to equal career opportunities for female personnel, who are a critical part of a GBV-competent workforce. The limits of the legal framework for GBV also hamper effective response. These challenges intersect with Mali's profound underreporting of sexual violence, which is driven by social stigma and fear of repercussions, lack of access to security services and support in many parts of the country, and widespread distrust of the legal system. These problems are underpinned by Mali's escalating insecurity and political turmoil, with CRSV continuing to be committed by members of armed groups, militias, self-defense groups, foreign security personnel, and members of the security forces.²¹ With the withdrawal of the United Nations Multi-dimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2023, the

progress achieved through GBV-focused SSR efforts risks being lost altogether.

Mali's experiences of GBV capacity-building through SSR thus confirm the limits of technical training in fragile states. Without local ownership, supportive legal frameworks, and institutional resilience, capacity-building does not translate to sustained CRSV responsiveness. This finding aligns with broader analyses of SSR in fragile contexts, which caution that externally driven reforms tend not to be effective or sustained where they are not embedded in deeper governance reforms.²²

Conclusion and recommendations

The cases of Ukraine and Mali show that while GBV-focused SSR support *can* significantly shape institutional capacity to respond to CRSV in wartime, its effectiveness depends on structural conditions. The study also demonstrates an interplay of enabling and inhibiting factors that shape whether SSR support will translate to improved security and justice outcomes. Ukraine offers a compelling illustration of how sustained investment in GBV-related capacity-building during peacetime can contribute to the resilience and responsiveness of security institutions under conditions of war. Institutional preparedness—grounded in curricula co-development, strategic frameworks at the national and the institutional level, and meaningful collaboration with women's CSOs—has enabled Ukraine's police

and prosecutors to implement survivor-centered responses more swiftly and effectively. Mali, by contrast, highlights the constraints of institutional fragility and weak internal gender equality. While there have been gains (including the establishment of gender focal points, new GBV protocols, and improved community trust), these remain partial and precarious, lacking broader institutional resilience. For the OSCE, which has invested heavily in gender mainstreaming and SSR programming, the central question is how to convert these lessons into practice.

This section outlines four top-level recommendations that emphasize institutionalization, survivor-centered approaches, cultural shifts, and civil society engagement. First, gender-responsive SSR must be embedded in governance-level SSR support rather than being delivered as *ad hoc* GBV and WPS technical assistance projects. Such institutional SSR support should prioritize the development of legal and policy frameworks, operational tools, internal oversight, and inter-agency coordination mechanisms. Second, SSR engagement with criminal justice must be survivor-centered, working with survivor networks as equal partners and paying careful attention to both male and female survivors and to how intersecting forms of discrimination impact survivors' access to services and justice. Third, reforms must creatively engage with institutional culture and wider social values, including gender norms and tolerance of GBV. Fourth, NGOs and CSOs must be recognized as indispensable part-

ners—as opposed to call-in trainers and researchers—in the design and delivery of SSR. When civil society plays a meaningful role in advising institutions, monitoring service provision, and shaping professional curricula, reforms are more attuned to lived realities and more likely to be sustained. Their goal is to promote measures that embed gender-responsiveness into the everyday formal and informal structures and practices of security and justice providers.

The institutionalization of GBV and CRSV prevention and response. The most consistent finding across both cases is that institutionalization determines sustainability. In Ukraine, police and prosecutors were ready to respond quickly to CRSV because GBV-sensitive protocols and curricula had been integrated into formal training structures prior to 2022 and national policy and strategic frameworks were already functioning. In Mali, by contrast, policies and protocols on GBV remained largely unused, with limited operational effect.

Efforts to improve security sector responses to GBV and CRSV are most effective when they move beyond individual training to strengthen institutional mandates, structures, and accountability frameworks. Systemic reform of GBV response requires attention to multiple institutional developments, including the deployment of expert staff dedicated to supporting GBV response (such as gender focal points, gender units, and GBV teams), coordination with NGOs and health services, career opportunities for

female personnel, the vetting of personnel with a history of GBV, the fostering of a supportive institutional culture, and monitoring and oversight mechanisms.

For the OSCE, this highlights the need to embed gender-responsive practices in the mandates, policies, and budgets of security institutions rather than treating them as standalone gender or WPS project-based activities. OSCE bodies and field operations can support this shift by prioritizing expert advisory support on gender-responsive security at the level of institutional governance. This could include supporting the formalization of internal policies and standard operating procedures that explicitly assign responsibilities for GBV and CRSV prevention and response, empowering GBV experts within institutions with clear mandates and resources, and integrating GBV indicators into performance frameworks and oversight bodies.

Institutionalization also requires legal clarity. OSCE support for legal reform should continue to prioritize the harmonization of national law with international standards, including the explicit criminalization of CRSV and alignment with the Istanbul Convention and the Rome Statute. This aligns with the OSCE's broader rule-of-law mandate and builds on its long-standing advisory work in Ukraine and the Western Balkans.

Survivor-centered approaches to GBV and CRSV. The second recommendation is to mainstream survivor-centered approaches across all OSCE-supported SSR. The needs, agency, and dignity of sur-

vivors should be at the heart of all GBV work. Research shows that confidentiality protections, informed consent, and trauma-sensitive interviewing have been critical to enabling Ukraine's prosecutors to respond to CRSV. Access to medical services and psychosocial and other forms of support were also important. Survivors themselves, when included as trainers and advisors, helped to shift institutional cultures within the security sector.

OSCE programs should therefore go beyond training officials to support survivor networks and CSOs as equal partners in SSR. This would resonate with OSCE Ministerial Council Decision 7/14 on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, which tasks the OSCE with supporting comprehensive victim assistance.²³ It is also consistent with soft law international standards such as the Murad Code, which highlights the importance of community-based, sustained support systems for survivors of CRSV.²⁴

Special attention should be paid to male survivors, whose needs are often different from those of women and girls and who are often invisible or underserved.²⁵ This includes ensuring that investigators and prosecutors are trained in both evidence collection from men and boys and trauma-sensitive engagement. More holistically, OSCE missions should ensure that survivor-centered approaches consider gender, age, and diversity and seek to address the stigma and distrust that prevents victim/survivors from engaging in justice processes.

Addressing values, attitudes, and institutional norms. The study highlights that in order for SSR to be impactful, technical skills are necessary but insufficient. In Mali, police and gendarmerie officers had received GBV training but often lacked the authority, resources, and institutional support to apply it. In Ukraine, by contrast, professional cultures had begun to shift before 2022, increasing receptiveness to survivor-centered approaches. Yet in both Mali and Ukraine, stigma and fear of ostracization remain a significant barrier to justice and support for CRSV survivors.

The OSCE should, in all its SSR support—but particularly as regards GBV—actively engage not only with laws, policies, and procedures but also with values and attitudes related to interpersonal violence and gender norms. Rather than being framed around training, SSR initiatives can incorporate methodologies such as mentoring, peer learning, and community dialogue. These offer more meaningful opportunities to transform the attitudes and beliefs that cause some forms of violence and abuse to be overlooked, including within the security and justice sector. Such conversations should include political and institutional leaders such as senior police and justice officials, CSOs, traditional and faith leaders, and social influencers can also be partners, ensuring that programs are attuned to cultural nuance.

Strengthening cooperation with NGOs and CSOs. Meaningful partnerships between civil society, police, and prosecu-

tors were decisive in supporting CRSV response in Ukraine. CSOs not only train state officials but also advise on law and policy and are part of advisory structures. The DCAF report emphasizes that this form of co-production of security was critical to enabling Ukraine to adapt quickly to CRSV challenges. Local NGO and CSO advocates and service providers bring deep contextual expertise and can be the only actors able to reach GBV victim/survivors in conflict-affected contexts and beyond major centers. They can generate political will for legal reform and institutional accountability.

The OSCE should design GBV capacity-building, and indeed all SSR activity, to support and empower local NGOs and CSOs alongside security sector institutions. It can support institutionalized cooperation between the security sector and women's CSOs via working groups, referral mechanisms and other coordination bodies, and collaborative research and monitoring. This aligns with global findings that multi-stakeholder approaches to WPS yield the most sustainable outcomes.²⁶ NGOs and CSOs should not, moreover, be treated merely as service providers; their long-term autonomy, safety, and resourcing should be funded. OSCE extrabudgetary projects could prioritize core grants to local organizations to build their sustainability and advocacy capacity, even in politically sensitive environments.

At a time when global backlash threatens to erode hard-won gains in gender equality, the OSCE must hold firm to its

comprehensive security mandate. Rather than stepping back from gender equality and WPS work on the grounds that they are “politically sensitive,” OSCE structures should place gender equality and WPS, including CRSV response, at the core of their SSR efforts. Gender-responsive SSR and WPS implementation should be recognized and framed as essential to institutional professionalism, operational effectiveness, integrity, and public trust in the security sector. The stakes are high: without such reforms, security institutions risk perpetuating impunity and even harm; with them, they can deliver justice, protection, and accountability. This is not only a matter of gender equality but also a core element of the OSCE's vision of comprehensive and cooperative security.

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The GONGO Challenge: Preserving Open Dialogue in OSCE Meetings

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Abstract

This paper examines the growing presence of government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) in international platforms, using the example of OSCE human dimension meetings and focusing on cases from Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Drawing on field observations from 2018 to 2025, it analyzes GONGOs' tactics, including diluting norms, crowding out independent voices, discrediting critics, and challenging the universality of human rights. These organizations function as tools of authoritarian "sharp power," exploiting the OSCE's open architecture to advance state narratives, simulate civic engagement, and undermine institutional credibility. The paper situates this phenomenon within broader debates on authoritarian internationalism and virtual politics, showing how GONGOs blend propaganda, procedural manipulation, and rhetorical strategies such as whataboutism to defend repressive regimes. It concludes with recommendations to strengthen OSCE resilience, preserve inclusivity, and counter disinformation without undermining the principles of openness and pluralism that are central to the Organization's mandate.

Keywords

GONGOs, OSCE human dimension, authoritarianism, disinformation

To cite this publication: Sebastien Peyrouse, "The GONGO Challenge: Preserving Open Dialogue in OSCE Meetings," in *OSCE Insights*, eds. Cornelius Friesendorf and Argyro Kartsonaki (Nomos, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748960751-06>

Introduction

This paper examines the government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGO) phenomenon within the OSCE context and situates it in the broader crisis of liberal internationalism. Over the past three decades, these organizations have become a defining fea-

ture of contemporary authoritarian and hybrid regimes' engagement with civil society. Initially emerging in the post-Cold War period as states sought to manage or emulate the burgeoning NGO sector, GONGOs serve as instruments through which governments simulate pluralism, co-opt independent activism, and legitimize state narratives domestically and internationally. Far from being marginal anomalies, GONGOs now operate across diverse political systems, from Russia and China to Egypt and Azerbaijan, and

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increasingly participate in multilateral forums where they amplify official positions and crowd out independent voices.

For decades, the OSCE has stood as one of the most open and inclusive multilateral forums, offering civil society an unparalleled space to raise human rights concerns directly with participating States. Many OSCE meetings allow the open participation of civil society representatives on equal terms with government representatives. OSCE rules for NGO participation are simpler than those of most other international organizations; the only grounds for exclusion are if organizations “resort to the use of violence or publicly condone terrorism or the use of violence.”¹ NGOs have equal access to the speakers list and can organize side events. Yet this very openness has become a vulnerability. Over the past two decades, GONGOs have grown increasingly active at OSCE human dimension meetings, particularly the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC), and Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (SHDMs). These GONGOs, while presenting themselves as independent civil society organizations, are in reality extensions of authoritarian states that deploy them to distort public debate, discredit genuine activists, and reshape the OSCE’s liberal norms from within.

Drawing on direct observation of ten OSCE human dimension meetings between 2018 and 2025, along with informal discussions with participants, OSCE offi-

cial, and independent activists, this study combines ethnographic observation, content analysis of speeches and documents, and triangulation through interviews and online archives. These field data are complemented by insights from the author’s longer monograph (*Unmasking GONGOs as Agents of Illiberalism*, 2024),² which provides the conceptual framework and comparative cases.

The paper proceeds in five main sections. The first section traces the historical and conceptual evolution of GONGOs as tools of authoritarian resilience, situating their rise within broader global trends of autocratic consolidation and the international diffusion of “sharp power.” The second section problematizes the conventional binary between GONGOs and independent NGOs, demonstrating the porous boundaries and hybrid realities of civil society under authoritarian regimes. The third section examines how GONGOs perform at OSCE human dimension meetings, analyzing their tactics of narrative construction, procedural manipulation, and disinformation as forms of “virtual politics” that simulate democratic engagement. The fourth section explores how these activities contribute to undermining the OSCE’s credibility by both eroding the Organization’s open and pluralistic ethos and advancing the normative challenge to the universality of human rights. Finally, the conclusion proposes a set of policy recommendations aimed at reinforcing the OSCE’s resilience—through transparency, procedural safeguards, and strengthened

collaboration with independent civil society—without compromising its foundational commitment to openness and dialogue.

Spotting GONGOs: Tools of influence

The resilience of autocracies is sustained not solely through coercion but through sophisticated strategies of co-optation and the deliberate structuring of civil society. Authoritarian regimes have developed both formal and informal mechanisms of influence, notably through the establishment of GONGOs. While the concept of GONGOs has roots in Soviet-era practices,³ the proliferation of such organizations over the past two decades marks a significant evolution in terms of the sophistication of their operations and messaging, which combine old propaganda tools with new technologies, including social media. These organizations often receive extensive political, financial, and logistical backing from the state, enabling them to bypass burdensome administrative regulations, such as restrictive registration procedures that typically hinder independent NGOs. In return for this privileged status, GONGOs align closely with official narratives, engage in self-censorship, and avoid criticizing government policies. Their outputs, including social media content, public statements, and media articles, often mirror or amplify state propaganda and disinformation campaigns. By occupying these spaces, some GONGOs successfully attract for-

eign funding and engage emerging social constituencies, trying to position themselves as critical civil society actors.

GONGOs also operate transnationally and have been increasingly active in international forums. Chinese GONGOs, for example, play a visible role during the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, endorsing Beijing's positions and discrediting independent critics.⁴ Similar patterns have emerged with GONGO participation at the Summit of the Americas (Cuba and Venezuela) and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (Cambodia and Myanmar), where they serve to legitimize authoritarian narratives and mask domestic repression.⁵

GONGO involvement has been particularly evident at the HDIM in Warsaw, especially since Kazakhstan's bid for the OSCE Chairmanship in 2008. In that context, Astana mobilized GONGOs to contest criticism of its human rights record and present the regime as committed to political reform and compliance with OSCE standards. Since then, GONGOs from other authoritarian states such as Azerbaijan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have established a presence at HDIMs and other OSCE human dimension meetings, adapting their tactics over time to reinforce state narratives.

Beyond the binary: Addressing the GONGO-NGO distinction

GONGOs are generally understood as state-created entities designed to advan-

ce governmental agendas, distinguishing them from independent NGOs initiated by citizen groups without official affiliation. While NGOs typically address societal concerns and may critique state policies, GONGOs are often viewed with skepticism for presenting a façade of civic engagement that obscures government shortcomings and simulates democratic values.

However, GONGOs are not a monolithic category, and the conventional binary of GONGOs versus NGOs fails to capture the complexity of civil society dynamics. Civil society is not always wholly autonomous from the state, nor solely a vehicle of opposition. Instead, it acts within a web of material exchanges, personal networks, and institutional linkages that sometimes blurs the lines between state and non-state actors.⁶ GONGOs can act as state surrogates in areas where the government has little appetite to engage, such as education, healthcare, women's rights, and environmental protection. Some NGOs may be viewed as GONGOs to the extent that they receive state-controlled funding or are led by individuals affiliated with the government; conversely, they may regain independence as those ties weaken. In very authoritarian settings where civil liberties are heavily restricted, such as in Turkmenistan, the distinction between GONGOs and NGOs becomes especially ambiguous, with genuine autonomy being the exception rather than the norm.⁷ Moreover, despite their ties to political power, GONGOs are not always mere conduits of state propaganda. Some

contribute to social or economic initiatives and play a role in fostering limited social cohesion.⁸ Their functions can therefore extend beyond simple state replication.

At OSCE events, although many GONGOs exemplify the classic model—i.e. state-established or state-funded organizations directed toward advancing government narratives—their diversity is also evident. Some were initially independent but have since been co-opted. Others follow a dual-track strategy, seeking international legitimacy and funding for their work while concurrently promoting state-aligned messaging that questions the universality of human rights and casts doubt on Western institutions. These tactics reflect the constrained operating space of civil society under authoritarian rule, where organizations must often align with official narratives to survive. Moreover, some “ghost” GONGOs, which appear to have been solely created to disseminate government viewpoints in international arenas, have registered for events without even basic organizational transparency.

Overall, a wide range of GONGOs routinely participate in OSCE meetings. Recognizing their multidimensional nature, the following sections examine them as instruments of authoritarian regimes: organizations that disseminate disinformation, try to sanitize government records despite serious human rights abuses, seek to discredit independent NGOs and dissenting individuals, and challenge the OSCE's mandate and the universality of fundamental freedoms.

Performing democracy: GONGOs and the transnational spread of virtual politics

Andrew Wilson has coined the term “virtual politics” to describe the illusion of democratic process in post-Soviet political systems, whereby sophisticated techniques mimic democracy and entire political parties and opposition figures are fabricated—phantom entities without substance or genuine political power.⁹ Rather than relying solely on overt repression, virtual politics manipulates public perception to maintain control, projecting the appearance of pluralism while consolidating state dominance. Mass media and state-controlled civil society serve as key vehicles in constructing and amplifying these artificial narratives.

At OSCE meetings, GONGOs have acted as agents of virtual politics, employing seemingly democratic rhetoric to depict their governments as committed defenders of human rights and the rule of law, aiming to reinforce their domestic and international legitimacy. They have promoted such narratives through three primary strategies. First, they assert that their countries’ constitutional and legal frameworks are in full alignment with international human rights standards. Second, they offer sweeping, unsubstantiated claims intended to demonstrate their governments’ respect for the rule of law and human rights. Third, they employ rhetorical devices, particularly hyperbolic language, to highlight their statements by magnifying the si-

gnificance or insignificance of matters.¹⁰ GONGOs from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan have used these approaches to highlight supposed progress in political reforms, gender equality, and media freedom. During the 2024 WHDC, for instance, several Kazakhstani GONGOs, including the National Endowment for Prosperity, asserted that constitutional amendments had reduced presidential powers and expanded parliamentary oversight—claims that were contradicted by independent monitoring organizations.¹¹

Overall, GONGOs have constructed and disseminated narratives with the explicit aim of engendering broad-based endorsement of these perspectives, including among Western stakeholders. Their narratives delineate a significant dichotomy between democratic societies and their authoritarian counterparts.¹² While independent civil society organizations participating in OSCE human dimension events have sought to expose human rights violations, including those occurring within their own countries, GONGOs representing authoritarian states have projected a sanitized, often flawless portrayal of human rights conditions in their respective territories.

Rebutting criticism and opposition: Defensive narrative strategies

GONGOs’ narrative strategies have gone beyond merely projecting an overly positive image of their home countries. In in-

ternational forums such as the OSCE, independent civil society organizations and opposition figures can speak out with far less censorship than at home and can more safely raise concerns and criticism about human rights abuses. In response, GONGOs have assumed a central role in countering these critical voices with competing, defensive state-aligned narratives.

At the human dimension conferences, most GONGOs have adopted a posture of categorical denial in the face of criticism related to the implementation of core OSCE commitments, including democratic elections, media freedom, and religious liberty. They seek to invalidate these criticisms by claiming, ostensibly on behalf of civil society and the general public, that the actual conditions in their countries diverge sharply from the accounts presented by independent NGOs and international human rights organizations. This defensive strategy is especially evident in their responses to allegations of electoral manipulation and lack of competitiveness, such as concerns about the conduct of recent elections in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, as documented by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Claiming to represent the voice of their country's people, GONGOs have argued that citizens have freely participated in fair and transparent elections, selecting their leaders without coercion.

Additionally, at the 2023 and 2024 OSCE human dimension meetings, GONGOs from Uzbekistan and Russia actively sought to deflect international

criticism of state repression and military aggression. Uzbekistani GONGOs such as *Jas Pikir*¹³ and the Karakalpak Branch of the Children and Families Support Association¹⁴ sought to reframe the 2022 unrest in Karakalpakstan as a violent insurrection rather than a peaceful protest suppressed by force. Russian GONGOs such as the Information Group on Crimes Against the Person defended Moscow's invasion of Ukraine as a humanitarian operation aimed at "denazification,"¹⁵ while Azerbaijani counterparts such as the Turkish Institute for Democracy and Human Rights justified the 2023 military offensive in Karabakh as a peacekeeping effort.¹⁶ Tajikistani GONGOs like the Association of Tajik Youth in the Russian Federation routinely denied reports of repression against journalists and opposition parties, claiming that the media in Tajikistan enjoyed "complete freedom."¹⁷

GONGOs have also frequently employed whataboutism, a rhetorical tactic that deflects criticism by highlighting perceived double standards on unrelated grievances, to undermine accountability and divert attention from authoritarian practices.¹⁸ This strategy, rooted in Soviet-era propaganda that deflected scrutiny of the gulag system by invoking issues such as US slavery, has been revived and intensified in contemporary Russia since the mid-2000s.¹⁹ At OSCE human dimension meetings, GONGOs have operationalized whataboutism to counter Western criticism. For example, Russian GONGOs have cited the imprisonment of Julian Assange to question the United States'

commitment to press freedom, or drawn parallels between the annexation of Crimea and peaceful state transformations such as the reunification of Germany or the dissolution of Czechoslovakia.

Moreover, GONGOs have actively manufactured alleged threats of destabilization or terrorism, purposefully sowing confusion by accusing independent organizations and opposition groups of having violent intentions. They routinely label opposition figures, journalists, and activists as criminals, terrorists, or foreign agents, framing them as a security threat and advancing narratives that official state representatives may struggle to convey with credibility. During Russia's 2019 campaign against Crimean journalists, for example, Russian GONGOs echoed state rhetoric by branding detained reporters as terrorists. Azerbaijani GONGOs similarly accused imprisoned journalists of misconduct or fraudulent accreditation, while Tajikistani GONGOs portrayed exiled activists as fugitives evading justice. In 2024, multiple Uzbekistani GONGOs were mobilized to discredit human rights defenders and opposition voices, particularly those who had criticized the government's violent response to the unrest in Karakalpakstan. These GONGOs accused exiled activists of corruption, foreign interference, and criminal behavior, closely mirroring state strategies aimed at vilifying the opposition and suppressing scrutiny.

GONGOs as tools of sharp power: Challenging the OSCE

Beyond discrediting critics and opposition figures, GONGOs have played a pivotal role in bolstering the sharp power strategies of authoritarian regimes. The concept of sharp power, introduced by Christopher Walker, refers to tactics aimed at manipulating and undermining the integrity of independent institutions, including international organizations.²⁰ Countries such as Russia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan have undertaken sustained efforts to challenge both the mandate and the activities of the OSCE, seeking to weaken its ability to serve as a platform for open dialogue and questioning its commitment to defending fundamental human rights. At OSCE human rights meetings, GONGOs have played an instrumental role in advancing these efforts through several disruptive tactics.

Efforts to regulate NGO participation in OSCE events

First, GONGOs have echoed their national delegations in advocating for restrictive measures aimed at limiting the participation of independent NGOs in OSCE events.

Chapter IV, paragraph 16 of the 1992 Helsinki Document outlines the criteria for NGO participation in OSCE events. It specifies only that “persons or organizations which resort to the use of violence or publicly condone terrorism or the use of

violence” can be barred from OSCE meetings.²¹ No other grounds for exclusion are mentioned in the OSCE regulations. However, although the decision has traditionally fallen to the Chairman-in-Office, some states have pushed for a formal vetting process that could enable them to potentially block unfavorable NGOs. Russia—where judicial independence is lacking and politically motivated prosecutions are widespread—has proposed barring participation by individuals with criminal records and restricting access for NGOs not legally registered in their home countries. Such proposals echo domestic restrictions used to silence dissent and, if adopted, would serve to exclude independent voices under the pretense of procedural legitimacy.

The push by certain states to block the participation of specific NGOs has escalated in recent years. In 2016, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan walked out of the HDIM in protest of the presence of NGOs from their respective countries of which they did not approve. From 2018 to 2023, Türkiye boycotted the Warsaw conference, objecting to the participation of NGOs it had designated as affiliated with the Fethullah Gülen movement. Several GONGOs from Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan have demanded the exclusion of certain NGOs from the HDIM, branding them as corrupt, terrorist, or extremist organizations.

Taking up space at OSCE events

While efforts to ban the participation of NGOs they deem troublesome have so far met with limited success, GONGOs have adopted alternative strategies—including taking up space and time at OSCE meetings—in order to marginalize independent organizations. At HDIMs, the number of oral interventions per session is capped, usually at fifty. If that many speakers register, the time allocated to each drops from five minutes to just one or two, reducing the quality and depth of the interventions. In practice, the large presence of GONGOs has meant that some civil society organizations critical of authoritarian governments have been unable to speak at all in the most contentious sessions (such as those dealing with elections, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly) or that their criticisms have been eclipsed by GONGO praise. Before Russia started boycotting most OSCE human rights events, government representatives from Russia were seen at the Warsaw meeting assisting their GONGOs in cutting the speaker registration line, thereby pushing independent NGOs further back in the speaking order or even preventing them from being among the first fifty able to deliver their statements.²²

This manipulation of procedure has been paired with obstructionist behavior. GONGOs have frequently made off-topic statements that require moderator intervention, while government delegations from authoritarian countries have raised

procedural objections to cut off independent NGOs' statements on the grounds that they were off topic, all while consistently remaining silent when their affiliated GONGOs engaged in the same behavior.²³

More recently, GONGOs have adapted to procedural changes that have limited their delegations' ability to respond to criticism. For instance, between 2022 and 2024, Warsaw conference sessions no longer permitted official delegations to exercise their right of reply orally. During this period, several GONGOs informally assumed this role. For example, Azerbaijani GONGOs responded directly in their statements to criticisms raised by independent NGOs and other delegations, particularly those from Armenia, thereby circumventing formal restrictions on state rebuttals.

GONGOs' obstructionist tactics have also included the use of verbal abuse and disinformation campaigns against independent civil society actors. Moderators have, on several occasions, been forced to call for decorum due to aggressive language. One notable example occurred during a human dimension meeting in Vienna in June 2025, when, in response to interventions by several representatives of Armenian civil society who had raised concerns about the rights of Armenian refugees and alleged war crimes committed by Azerbaijan, Ahmad Shahidov, director of an Azerbaijani GONGO, accused Armenia of engaging in revanchism and concluded that "during the next war, Armenia may completely lose its sovereignty, and the

Azerbaijani army may drink Turkish tea in Yerevan, pray and perform namaz in Yerevan's Blue Mosque."²⁴

In addition to verbal attacks, some GONGOs have resorted to spreading false printed materials. In 2024, Uzbekistani GONGOs circulated a fake leaflet bearing the logo of the independent NGO Freedom of Eurasia during the Warsaw meeting, apparently in an effort to discredit the NGO's work and sow confusion among other participants. These actions reflect a growing trend of hostile behavior that has sought not only to neutralize dissenting voices but to actively damage the reputations and credibility of independent civil society actors within international spaces.

Some GONGOs have also challenged the credibility of the OSCE and ODIHR. Usen Suleimen, founder of the National Endowment for Prosperity, published an article accusing ODIHR of welcoming "corrupt officials, fugitive oligarchs, thieves and criminals" who, in his view, exploited human rights discourse for personal gain. He further alleged that conference organizers had intentionally sidelined his organization's interventions while privileging statements from "quasi-human rights activists" and "extremist structures," accusing them of replacing legitimate voices with paid operatives serving a "criminal oligopoly."²⁵

Challenging the principles of universal human rights

Finally, and importantly, GONGOs form a key component of the authoritarian toolkit deployed to challenge the normative foundations of international organizations. They amplify the rhetoric of authoritarian leaders who seek to recast human rights and democratic principles as allegedly alien constructs, culturally incompatible with their nations' historical legacies and societal values. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, for example, Putin's rhetoric has become increasingly confrontational, presenting Western liberal values as not only decadent but morally degenerate, at times even equating them with the normalization of pedophilia.²⁶

In this alternative narrative, democracy is not rejected outright but reinterpreted through the lens of sovereignty and state control. Models such as Russia's "managed democracy" or China's "socialist democracy with Chinese characteristics" are presented as legitimate, culturally appropriate alternatives to the democratic standards enshrined in OSCE commitments. Echoing the discourse of figures such as Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping,²⁷ GONGOs have contributed to a broader narrative that portrays liberalism as obsolete and a threat to security and social stability and frames Western advocacy for democracy and human rights as interference in the sovereign affairs of other states. Within this worldview, at OSCE meetings they have advocated to redefine

fundamental rights, proposing an alleged necessary recalibration of the balance between civil liberties and national security. Invoking the global threat of terrorism, they advance the argument that rights such as freedom of expression and assembly may be subordinated to public order and state sovereignty, thereby further undermining the universality of human rights norms.

Conclusion and recommendations

GONGOs have become key instruments of authoritarian influence. Presented as independent civil society groups, they instead promote regime interests and act as updated successors to Soviet-era propaganda. By exploiting the openness of liberal democracies, especially free speech protections that do not exist at home, GONGOs spread disinformation, undermine democratic values, and work to legitimize illiberal narratives. Their activities go beyond international meetings, with many maintaining websites and active social media channels to amplify state messaging.

At OSCE human dimension meetings, GONGOs are used to discredit independent NGOs and normalize authoritarian practices, threatening the integrity of one of the few remaining platforms where genuine civil society can speak openly to governments. Addressing this phenomenon requires coordinated attention from democratic states, international organizations, and real NGOs through monitoring,

analysis, and sustained advocacy. Countering GONGOs is not procedural house-keeping; it is part of a broader effort to defend human rights and protect multilateral institutions from authoritarian capture.

While remaining its greatest strength, the OSCE's inclusive design can also be a vulnerability. To preserve space for independent civil society and prevent authoritarian regimes from denying entry to activists they do not like, the OSCE does not have a formal vetting system. The Organization's consensus-based decision-making prevents it from sanctioning states that abuse its forums. This institutional weakness mirrors a broader crisis facing liberal multilateralism. Just as the United Nations struggles with the politicization of the Human Rights Council, the OSCE must contend with the susceptibility of its procedures to misuse. GONGOs exploit this vacuum, seeking to transform the OSCE from a space of accountability into one of confusion and contestation.

An effective response requires a comprehensive and principled strategy, one that acknowledges the complexity of international engagement without compromising the foundational values of the OSCE. The emphasis should be on identifying the presence of GONGOs, calling out their narratives, and countering their disinformation campaigns, particularly their strategic manipulation of language and misuse of civil society frameworks.

Installing some type of vetting mechanism aimed at prohibiting GONGOs from participating in OSCE events would be incompatible with the Organization's principles, especially its commitment to openness, pluralism, and freedom of expression, and would likely cause collateral damage by also undermining the participation of independent NGOs. It would also be incorrect to cast GONGOs as uniformly detrimental agents of disinformation, or to idealize independent NGOs as inherently virtuous. For example, lack of state funding alone is not a reliable indicator of a civil society organization's credibility or independence; many legitimate organizations, such as the National Endowment for Democracy and the United States Institute of Peace, receive government support while maintaining transparent operations and a strong commitment to democratic values. These institutions do not act at the behest of their funders but rather operate within ethical mandates and robust accountability mechanisms.

Equally important is avoiding content-based exclusion of GONGOs. OSCE regulations rightly prohibit the participation of individuals or organizations that promote or use violence or terrorism, but political alignment or controversial rhetoric does not constitute valid grounds for exclusion. Disqualifying groups based on their views would set a dangerous precedent, inviting authoritarian regimes to apply the same standards to silence independent voices. This risk is compounded by the fact that the decision to permit or

exclude organizations lies with the OSCE Chairmanship, a role that has at times been filled by authoritarian states with questionable human rights records. During Kazakhstan's 2010 Chairmanship, for instance, several NGOs were excluded from the Warsaw meeting following objections from Turkmenistan and Russia. Attempts to ban GONGOs could thus backfire, creating a mechanism that authoritarian states might exploit to restrict civil society participation.

Instead, a more effective approach would be to confront GONGOs' rhetoric and activities while ensuring robust engagement with genuine civil society actors. Democratic states should work in partnership with independent NGOs to monitor, document, and publicly expose instances where GONGOs distort facts, disrupt dialogue, or serve as state proxies. A practical step would be the creation of a standing working group composed of civil society representatives, researchers, and regional experts focused on OSCE processes. This group could monitor GONGO participation in OSCE meetings, trace their affiliations with state structures, and document inconsistencies between proclaimed missions and observed behavior. The group's findings could be disseminated in an annual report presented to OSCE delegations and made available to the broader public. Such transparency efforts should be replicated in other international forums, including the United Nations, to strengthen global resistance to authoritarian co-optation of civil society mechanisms.

Effective countermeasures are also needed during OSCE meetings themselves. Participating States should be encouraged to publicly challenge the legitimacy of GONGOs during sessions, making clear that their interventions are recognized as disingenuous and politically motivated. To support this, the OSCE should reinstate the oral right of reply, a valuable tool for clarifying distortions and challenging misinformation in real time.

Moderators also play a critical role in maintaining the integrity of discussions. They must ensure that all speakers adhere to the agenda and that no organization monopolizes speaking time to pursue unrelated agendas. Moderators should intervene if GONGOs use the platform to impersonate official delegations, advocate violence, or issue personal attacks on independent activists. Statements that accuse others of criminality, threaten legal action, or reveal personal information cross the line of acceptable discourse in international meetings and should be explicitly disallowed. Such actions are essential to preserving the integrity of the meeting sessions within the OSCE framework.

Notes

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