Civil Society at a Critical Juncture: Finland's 2025 OSCE Chairpersonship and the Future of Civic Engagement

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Abstract

Over the past decade, democracy has experienced a steady decline. As part of this trend, civic spaces across the globe have continued to shrink. The OSCE has a significant legacy of defending civic space, as civil society participation in security politics is fundamental to its approach to peace and security. Yet Russia's war in Ukraine, together with a broader erosion of commitment to OSCE values, has led many to question the continued validity of the OSCE *acquis*. This paper examines how engagement with non-governmental actors has evolved throughout the CSCE/OSCE process. Focusing on Finland's activities during its 2025 OSCE Chairpersonship, we categorize contemporary forms of civil society participation in the OSCE. By analytically connecting past and present, we contribute to the broader debate on the changing relationship between civil society and the OSCE. We argue that the OSCE remains well placed to serve as a forum for comprehensive security dialogue between governments and civil society. However, both individual and institutional innovation is needed if respect for fundamental freedoms is to endure in a shifting international order.

Keywords

OSCE, civil society, Helsinki Principles, Helsinki 50+, comprehensive security

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Introduction

Finland's 2025 Chairpersonship of the OSCE coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and was originally associated with Finnish President Sauli Niinistö's broader objective of reviving the Helsinki spirit.[1] In the lead-up to 2025, however, support for cooperative security significantly diminished following Russia's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. At the same time, the alarmingly rapid decline of free and open civic space across the OSCE region—paralleling a prolonged global erosion of democracy, media freedom, and the rule of law[2]—has ushered

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in a dangerous new era in European and global politics.

In response, supporting the unique role of civil society in the OSCE became a key priority of Finland's 2025 Chairpersonship.[3] Although this priority was endorsed by many participating States, particularly within the EU, it was not without controversy. Despite the CSCE/OSCE's long history of engagement with non-state actors and civil society,[4] as well as the numerous OSCE commitments that underpin such engagement,[5] tensions have developed over the years regarding whether—and how—the role of civil society actors in the organization should be maintained.[6]

The problems facing civil society are manyfold. To begin with, governments are becoming less willing to fund civil society initiatives. In 2024 alone, funding for non-governmental work recorded as official development assistance fell 7 percent among leading OECD countries.[7] Furthermore, among the most pressing issues within the OSCE region is the phenomenon of "foreign agent laws."[8] This is compounded by the growing trend of GONGOization—the increased presence of government-sponsored NGOs that advocate state interests—which impedes genuine dialogue between free and independent civil society actors and participating States.[9] Even within the EU and the United States, legal experts and civil society actors increasingly warn of shrinking civic spaces.[10] In contrast to the historical narrative of the Helsinki effect, which valorizes transnational social movements and civil society as forces that helped end the Cold War, a parallel rhetoric has emerged that re-prioritizes the sanctity of internal affairs. This counternarrative is increasingly invoked by decision-makers not only in Russia but in Georgia, Hungary, Azerbaijan, and the United States. In this environment, many civil society organizations (CSOs) are simply fighting to remain viable. This contrasts sharply with the situation in the 1990s, when civil society actors were often described as "the conscience of Helsinki" and, in consensus CSCE/OSCE documents, regarded as important partners in maintaining democratic standards.[11]

In this paper we present various CSCE/OSCE histories that have largely developed in parallel but within separate strands of academic discussion. We argue that, when considered together, these histories offer a novel framework for reflecting on contemporary civil society activity in the OSCE. We then apply this framework to analyze a range of initiatives undertaken during Finland's 2025 Chairpersonship to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. Civil society actors have historically been, and remain, co-producers of comprehensive security, often serving as more vocal supporters of this concept than states themselves. Historical reflection on the present moment highlights the pressing need for new and innovative strategies to sustain this independent comprehensive security tradition in a changing European security landscape. We conclude with historically informed recommendations for strengthe-

ning continued civil society cooperation within the OSCE.

The evolution of non-governmental actors in the CSCE/OSCE context

The Final Act, signed in Helsinki in 1975, transformed prevailing conceptions of security.[12] It allowed security discussions to extend beyond armament—that is, beyond the political-military dimension or hard security—to include economic, environmental, and human dimension issues. This holistic approach would come to be known as "comprehensive security," though the term itself was not formally incorporated into CSCE mandates until the early 1990s.[13]

Although the innovative potential of the Final Act was not immediately realized universally, it was gradually taken up by social movements, dissidents, and non-governmental organizations. This development formed part of a broader historical process already underway in the 1960s, in which "the rising focus on human rights" supported "claims to give individuals more standing as the ultimate referent object for security."[14] For example, the Finnish National Committee for European Security organized the first-ever "Security Days" in November 1970, collecting over 250 Finnish citizens and civil society actors to discuss the prospect of a European security conference and the German question.[15]

The Helsinki Final Act also provided a new language through which individuals could demand the rights and freedoms that governments had internationally agreed to respect.[16] What came to be known as "détente from below" emerged largely because participants in social movements "rejected existing conditions," creating greater openness to transnational contacts.[17] By drawing on the emerging language of human rights, activists used the Final Act as a foundation for connecting diverse transnational social movements concerned with environmental and political-military issues, while also encouraging broader participation in debates on international security.

The Helsinki Committees are the most extensively studied of these networks, but they represent only one piece of the puzzle.[18] Activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain built forms of cooperation despite being odd bedfellows—Eastern European dissidents, Reaganite and Thatcherite Cold Warriors, interfaith groups, left-leaning peace activists, and nuclear disarmament movements selectively set aside political differences to pursue common goals.[19] For example, the demands of environmental movements increasingly became intertwined with broader social and political concerns.[20] Diplomacy also began to change, as "Western embassies were increasingly expected to have contacts with dissidents."[21] These new connections "broke the Cold War field-of-force and gave history a new hinge,"[22] enabling citizens to uncover "the hidden possibilities in the Helsinki Process."[23] Civil societies and Helsinki Committees may not have ended the Cold War, but they signifi-

cantly strengthened the legitimacy of nongovernmental actors in international relations.[24]

With the end of the Cold War, the range of issues and actors that could be discussed in relation to security again expanded. This shift was reflected in the emergence of concepts such as human security, introduced in the United Nations Development Programme's 1994 Human Development Report, as well as in the rise of critical security studies in academic debates. In turn, "expectations of what civil society could contribute to international politics" grew in the post–Cold War period.[25] This juncture, which ushered in the "golden era" of civil society,[26] coincided with the liberal internationalist "belief that NGOs were shaping a new, post-Westphalian world."[27]

For many observers at the time, the CSCE/OSCE stood as a forerunner in realizing a new vision of a liberal security community—an era sometimes described as "the Helsinki Moment."[28] The 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the 1999 Istanbul Declaration strongly praised CSOs for historically upholding CSCE/OSCE principles and for "stimulating citizens' participation in public affairs," instructing that CSOs continue to be involved in CSCE/OSCE activities and structures.[29] As a result, the formalization and institutionalization of civil society cooperation advanced significantly within the third dimension. The Office of Free Elections, later renamed the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), was established in 1991 with a clear mandate to work "with civil society organizations, strengthening national monitoring capacities, assisting in trial monitoring, and strengthening the independence of the judiciary."[30] Despite these advances, some commentators argued that the question of how to incorporate CSOs into emerging OSCE structures was only partially addressed during this period.[31]

Formalization also took place within civil society itself. Founded in 1982, the International Helsinki Federation (IHF) functioned as a formal "federation" of Helsinki groups as well as a clearinghouse for activists monitoring the implementation of the Helsinki Principles. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the IHF became "more complex" and "multidimensional" in the 1990s, as the number of Helsinki groups grew from seventeen to thirty between 1989 and 1996.[32] At its peak, the federation coordinated forty-six human rights organizations.

In the early 1990s, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (HCA) movement also emerged in parallel with the Helsinki Committees, coordinating social movements loosely connected to the Helsinki Process that focused on peacebuilding. While the HCA functioned as a transnational forum for public debate, it was first and foremost a space in which participants sought to take responsibility for their own societies.[33] Between 1990 and 1995, the HCA brought together around 600–1,000 participants annually, representing one of the first attempts to integrate Europe at the grassroots le-

vel.[34] Even so, some scholars argue that the new international environment of the 1990s incentivized many CSOs to recalibrate their missions in response to funder requirements and pressure to ensure organizational survival. In this context, organizations increasingly sold expert services rather than addressing the needs of their constituencies,[35] leading to what has been described as the " NGOization" or "commodification" of civil society.[36] Over time, many local peace organizations also found that working with the EU or national funding bodies was more financially sustainable than engaging with the OSCE, offering one explanation for the subsequent decline in civil society engagement in the OSCE today.

In 2007, the IHF declared bankruptcy and was forced to cease operations following fraud committed by its financial manager. The Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) was subsequently established in 2011 to coordinate civil society cooperation within the OSCE context, effectively replacing the IHF, though with substantially less funding and a more diverse membership (110 organizations as of 2025).[37] The CSP brings together a mixture of HCA and IHF participants, including proponents of both constituency-building and human rights education,[38] as well as those who emphasize a more expert or watchdog role for civil society. Since 2011, the CSP has developed into an important network of OSCE-oriented CSOs and human rights organizations, facilitating the rapid mobilization of cooperation and solidarity across the OSCE area. The closure of the IHF nevertheless dealt a significant blow to institutionalized networks of human rights advocates and continues to cast a shadow over perceptions of civil society partners' financial management capacities. As a result, many participating States have come to prefer working with larger, more established partner organizations.[39]

The new millennium also witnessed a structural development in the international system with the emergence of GONGOs—organizations that function as "extensions of authoritarian states" and that seek "to distort public debate, discredit genuine activists, and reshape the OSCE's liberal norms from within."[40] The participation of GONGOs in OSCE meetings became increasingly evident after 2008, as these organizations began to exploit the inclusive nature of OSCE events.

Institutionalized engagement, watchdogs, and new initiatives

While practically every OSCE Chairperson-in-Office since the position's inception in 1993 has noted the significance of cooperating with civil society in one form or another for the purpose of "keeping the principles of Helsinki alive,"[41] Chairs have differed on how much to invest in civil society participation and which dimensions of security to prioritize. In 2025, strengthening civil society engagement across all three dimensions of the OSCE was a key priority for the Finnish Chairpersonship. This approach

was inspired by the fiftieth anniversary but was also shaped by political realities that, from the official Finnish perspective, did not permit a renewed détente or revived "Spirit of Helsinki."[42] Civil society engagement within the OSCE in 2025 can be divided into three categories: the continuation of established, consensus-based institutionalized cooperation; watchdog activities; and new forms of cooperation that are not always consensus-based. In what follows, we introduce these three distinct yet overlapping forms of civil society engagement and analyze their implications.

Institutionalized engagement

The best-known example of institutionalized engagement is the Warsaw Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), Europe's largest annual civil society conference. Traditionally, the meeting has provided a forum for critical exchanges on participating States' implementation of human dimension commitments. Since 2022, however, the conference has taken place as the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC) in the absence of a consensus mandate. In 2025, consensus was again blocked by Russia, leading the Finnish Chair, in cooperation with ODIHR, to organize the ten-day conference as the WHDC. Even without a mandate, the event attracted a record number of almost 1,900 registrations, resulting in 1,200 participants.[43] The HDIM/WHDC is complemented by smaller, specialized Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (usually three per year) held in Vienna.

In 2025, specific committee meetings under the Permanent Council for each OSCE dimension also served as relevant entry points for in-depth exchanges between participating States, experts, and civil society representatives.

Another formalized civil society event in the OSCE context is the annual Parallel Civil Society Conference, held since 2010 on the day before the Ministerial Council. Members of the CSP are the main organizers of this event, with technical and financial assistance from the Chair and other participating States. The Parallel Conference provides a forum for high-level dialogue and exchange between civil society and the OSCE leadership. In 2025, the conference showcased CSP recommendations and outcomes of the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process, which was designed and implemented by the CSP, to "develop a set of concrete recommendations on change and reform" and expand the "circle of stakeholders interested in making the OSCE more effective."[44] Over a nine-month period, the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process brought together over sixty CSOs from across the OSCE area in five reflection workshops covering all three dimensions.[45]

Institutionalized engagement of this kind has both positive and negative aspects. Critics argue that the ten-day event in Warsaw (whether mandated or not) is excessively long, while also falling short of systematically reviewing partici-

pating States' fulfillment of OSCE commitments. Over the past decade, several participating States—including Russia, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and others—have blocked consensus on holding the HDIM.[46] Additionally, the number of GONGO participants at the HDIM/WHDC has increased, as has the presence of civil society actors that do not respect human rights, including anti-rights movements. These groups take up the limited speaking time, diluting meaningful state–civil society cooperation. The Parallel Civil Society Conference, in turn, is viewed by many as more performative than substantive, limiting its ability to motivate new partners to engage with the OSCE. In 2025, the Secretary General of the OSCE did not attend the Parallel Civil Society Conference, further constraining exchanges between civil society and OSCE leadership.

In the OSCE context, the institutionalization of civil society cooperation generally means that participating States and OSCE institutions work with established circles of civil society partners. Funding is often allocated to the same individuals and organizations that regularly engage with OSCE institutions, rather than being used to expand networks of stakeholders.[47] Delegations generally trust the selection of civil society actors proposed by autonomous OSCE institutions, which maintain lists of established partners. Moreover, the Parallel Civil Society Conference is not an open event, and new actors may find it difficult to secure a place among the speakers in Warsaw without prior exposure to the OSCE. As a result, a genuine tension emerges: How can both civil society and the OSCE expand and renew their circles of partners while also defending against authoritarian actors who exploit this same openness to undermine meaningful OSCE–civil society cooperation?

Watchdogs

To expand the circle of partners, Finland facilitated informal side events at Chairpersonship meetings throughout 2025, giving both new and established CSO partners the opportunity to exercise their watchdog roles. In Warsaw alone, over 120 side events were organized. Across the year, the Chair also facilitated side events related to all three dimensions at major Chairpersonship meetings, including the Ministerial Council in December. Civil society actors used these opportunities to highlight participating States' (non)compliance with OSCE commitments. Ukrainian civil society actors presented evidence of Russia's violations of human rights and humanitarian law in Ukraine. Other side events highlighted issues such as the growing use of strategic lawsuits against public participation in the United States to silence environmental activists, as well as Azerbaijan's widespread use of GONGOs at COP29.[48]

Finland also opened itself to scrutiny and criticism from independent CSOs through the Helsinki+50 Reflection Process and by commissioning the Finnish

Foundation for Media and Development (Vikes) to assess Finland's implementation of OSCE commitments related to media freedom. In addition, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs hosted three hearings with domestic CSOs, allowing participants to raise issues directly with the Chairperson-in-Office, the Special Representative on Civil Society, and foreign ministry staff. These were valuable events, as many attendees came from CSOs that did not typically engage with the OSCE. The Special Representative on Civil Society highlighted this approach as best practice for future Chairpersonships,[49] emphasizing that engaging a diverse range of domestic actors is essential to ensuring an inclusive Chairpersonship.

New initiatives

To promote new forms of both formal and informal civil society cooperation beyond the human dimension, Finland contributed substantially to the OSCE Fund for Civil Society Participation. One key outcome was the Helsinki+50 initiative. The Helsinki+50 Conference, held on July 31, reflected on the past fifty years of the CSCE/OSCE and its relevance in a changing world, while incorporating CSOs as both participants and key speakers. This was followed by the Helsinki+50 Discussions in Finlandia Hall on August 1, where civil society actors and government representatives were brought together to discuss the future of the OSCE —a historic first in that civil society actors were invited to contribute formally to OSCE political discussions.[50]

In further experimenting with new forms of civil society engagement, Finland supported the OSCE by All project, implemented by Historians without Borders in Finland from January 2024 to May 2025.[51] One key aspect of this project was the introduction of new (environmental) civil society partners to the OSCE, contributing to the Chair's objective of developing the OSCE as a forum for environmental and climate security.[52] Civil society actors involved in the project subsequently played a significant role in planning, designing, and implementing the OSCE Chairpersonship Conference on Climate and Security: Unleashing the Potential of the Comprehensive Approach, which took place in June 2025.[53]

In the first dimension, the Finnish Chairpersonship contributed to a range of events and projects aimed at strengthening cooperation between civil society and think tanks. These efforts included support for the OSCE-wide network of think tanks and for individual workshops organized by the Finnish Institute of International Affairs, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, and the European Leadership Network.[54] Cooperation resulted, for example, in a book on indivisible security and a policy brief on gender-responsive arms control.[55] Collectively, these activities reflect a renewed effort to consider how civil society actors can shape discussions related to the OSCE's first dimension.[56]

Finally, the Chairpersonship published recommendations on how to sustain meaningful engagement with civil society in the OSCE context.[57] These Helsinki Recommendations sought to dispel the myth that civil society is relevant only in the human dimension.

The limits of civil society—OSCE Cooperation

In the post-2022 European security environment, participating States have ceased negotiating new commitments at the annual Ministerial Council. While consensus on holding the Ministerial Council itself has been maintained, the absence of consensus on holding other key OSCE events meant that the Chairpersonship had to rely on its discretionary authority to invite civil society actors to key tables throughout 2025.[58] The CSO community, as well as CSO-friendly countries such as France, the Netherlands, and Ireland, welcomed this attention for practical reasons: CSOs offer valuable insights, contribute to the design of an integrated, whole-of-society approach to security and resilience, and help raise awareness of local problems and solutions.[59]

Nevertheless, Finland's 2025 efforts to strengthen the status of civil society within the OSCE hierarchy were not universally welcomed. Participants remarked after the Helsinki fiftieth anniversary conference that "the omnipresence of civil society representatives in Helsinki's main and side events risks further frustrating those states that have for many years criticized the virtual amputation of the OSCE's other two pillars (politico-military and economic and environmental)."[60] Even in Finland, despite substantial political support for civil society, austerity measures led to cuts in government funding for CSOs, particularly for peace organizations.[61] These cuts illustrate some of the contemporary obstacles to further streamlining civil society participation in the OSCE: many still view civil society as relevant primarily to third-dimension discussions and as out of place in a "traditional" hard security context. However, civil society actors operate across all three dimensions, with human rights serving as a key connecting theme.

Reflecting the politicized nature of civil society cooperation with state delegations, the Swiss Chairperson-in-Office for 2026, Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis, did not mention civil society, human rights, or the human dimension in his January 15, 2026, speech officially launching Switzerland's Chairpersonship,[62] despite human rights being a Swiss priority for 2026.[63] It is nevertheless a positive sign that Finland's Special Representative on Civil Society from 2025, Anu Juvonen, continues in her role under the Swiss Chairpersonship, maintaining a degree of continuity with Finland's work in 2025. In another positive development, the Swiss Task Force and the Swiss Helsinki Committee have reestablished the national civil society working group created during the 2014 Swiss Chairpersonship to engage Swiss CSOs with the OSCE. This initia-

tive offers hope that national-level CSO actors will be more consistently incorporated into the implementation of future Chairpersonship programs.

Recommendations

In an increasingly challenging environment for civic activism, new strategies are needed to protect fundamental freedoms and strengthen the diverse roles civil society actors play in ensuring comprehensive security. The analysis presented above can help guide this work. Rather than replicating the 1990s model, states must be reminded of their international commitments, particularly with regard to fundamental rights, as a minimum requirement for upholding core principles of peace and security. Finland's Chairpersonship helped engage a broader range of stakeholders, but lasting change and a renewed "conscience of Helsinki" among states and citizens will require sustained effort. Building on the momentum of 2025, we offer the following historically informed recommendations to support this process.

First, civil society actors are an essential part of the OSCE's work in times of crisis due to their ability to transcend borders and political divides in ways that diplomats and government representatives cannot. In this vein, *people-to-people contacts should be maintained and facilitated as a fundamental part of the CSCE/OSCE's legacy*. In an age of disinformation and social media, returning to the original Helsinki objective of human contacts appears more vital than ever. Civil society actors themselves have asserted that they are not bound by the east and west of Vienna dichotomy. OSCE fora, as well as independent bodies such as the CSP, remain among the few remaining platforms where Ukrainian and Russian civil society actors can still meet. Other independent social movements and civil society groups likewise provide important examples of how broader interest in and discussion of the OSCE can be mobilized.[64] At the same time, governments have become increasingly adept at restricting the movement and political activities of individuals who hold unfavorable political views. Human contacts must therefore be reconsidered and actively defended in an era marked by growing polarization, disinformation, surveillance, and repression.

Second, *civil society needs political support.* In-person meetings between decision-makers, diplomats, and civil society representatives are significant signals of state solidarity. In 2025, the Chairperson-in-Office, Finnish Foreign Minister Elina Valtonen, revived the best practice of systematically meeting with civil society representatives during field visits. This runs counter to the growing tendency among diplomats and politicians toward disengagement from civil society as violations of the Helsinki Final Act by participating States increase. Numerous examples illustrate that personal contact between diplomats, decision-makers, and civil society actors can encourage greater adherence to Final Act principles. For instance, several

EU diplomats remained at Svetlana Alexievich's apartment during the Belarusian protests in 2020, preventing her imprisonment. Similarly, former US Ambassador David Pressman participated annually in the Budapest Pride parade, which Viktor Orbán cited as a reason for allowing the event to continue.[65]

Third, *the OSCE should build on Finland's 2025 efforts to incorporate civil society voices across all three dimensions*. While civil society has not historically been a key focus of the OSCE's second dimension, this represents a missed opportunity. Environmental movements are among the most significant international social movements of our time, and civil society participation is now widely seen as essential to the legitimacy of global environmental governance.[66] Environmental CSOs also generate "strategic and high-quality environmental knowledge on environmental conditions, developing and implementing innovative and inspiring sustainable practices [...] and capitalising on existing networks to link professionals from NGOs with individuals to collaboratively work towards transitions."[67] If the OSCE is to adapt to a new era of European security and to remain a meaningful forum for civil society-state cooperation, new partners across a wider range of issue areas must be (re)incorporated.

Fourth, *more sustainable structures for civil society engagement should be established, for example through a civil society troika*. As the troika structure has played an important role in maintaining political continuity between Chairpersonships, some have suggested establishing a similar mechanism for sustained civil society engagement. The CSP could coordinate a civil society troika working group, supporting NGO and activist networks seeking to promote public support for a Chairpersonship both domestically and internationally. Such a structure would enable civil society actors to maintain continuity in their advocacy from year to year, amplifying important messages and recommendations from a broad range of actors rather than relying solely on the CSP.

Continuity in civil society engagement is crucial, as initiatives within the CSCE/OSCE have historically developed slowly and recommendations are not always implemented immediately. For example, Special Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office Dr. h.c. Gernot Erler was regarded by some as an informal liaison between the German Chairpersonship and civil society actors, organizing ninety outreach events for civil society partners throughout 2016.[68] Following recommendations from the CSP that same year,[69] this liaison role gradually evolved into the more formalized position of Special Representative on Civil Society, which has been maintained in the Maltese 2024, Finnish 2025, and Swiss 2026 Chairpersonships. Identifying shared interests between participating States and civil society and gradually developing them through sustained engagement will be critical to finding new ways to uphold the OSCE's comprehensive security philosophy in

practice in a new era of European security.

Fifth, *the OSCE should form a Group of Friends/Task Force on civil society participation in the OSCE*. This group should comprise experts, civil society actors, and diplomats or decision-makers to examine which aspects of civil society participation can be institutionalized most effectively, how to address the challenge posed by GONGOs, and how best to support autonomous networks—historically a strength of the Helsinki Process. As Christian Strohal argued, naming and shaming becomes less effective when states are shameless.[70] Innovation is therefore required in what increasingly appears to be an era without shame, and the Special Representative on Civil Society would be well placed to advise on or lead such efforts.

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