

Call for Action - Helsinki +50 process: 3 years later

Discussions on the OSCE PA Call for Action started in Autumn 2020. [The Call for Action](#) was issued at an event in the margins of the December 2020 OSCE Ministerial Council in Tirana (online, due to Covid).

A long series of meetings took place since then, increasingly focussing on the Helsinki +50 perspective. The Russian invasion of Ukraine interrupted the flow of the discussions and refocussed the process on the situation in Ukraine, with several meetings devoted to discussing developments in the country, implications for the broader community and ways in which the OSCE and specifically OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) could assist.

As the war increasingly affected processes within the OSCE, the focus progressively returned on the issue of protecting the acquis of the Organization, its principles and commitments, on improving the functioning of processes and mechanisms assisting in the implementation and introducing penalties for violations. The profound changes in today's security environment as the core principles underpinning the international rules-based order are continuously being challenged. Consequently, business in the OSCE has not continued as usual: field missions operating in Ukraine were closed down as a result of lack of consensus to extend their respective mandates, and the Moscow Mechanism was invoked several times concerning Russian atrocities in Ukraine and the deteriorating human rights situation within Russia. Nonetheless, the organization has continued to operate in this new reality with discussions taking place in the Permanent Council and capitals, and the launch of a newly conceived support program to Ukraine. While the future of "European security" is uncertain, the European security architecture will have to be reshaped as soon as circumstances permit. The OSCE will have the opportunity to play a central role in these processes as one of the very few arenas in which Russia and the West can engage with each other. But for this to happen there will be a need for strong leadership, vision and political support. In the meantime, necessary reforms to build a stronger, more agile and more viable OSCE are needed to be able to allow the organization to perform better in a deeply divided environment and to allow its participating states to re-engage constructively when the political environment is conducive to dialogue.

Below is an abstract of selected key points/recommendations from discussions so far. The full text of the reports is available on the [OSCE PA website](#).

Lack of profile, insufficient political attention/engagement at the Ministerial level

The OSCE has always mirrored global politics, hence the challenges the organization is facing today can be considered a reflection of geopolitical dynamics, which are impacting most multilateral institutions beyond the OSCE. Nonetheless, the OSCE has been particularly affected, being primarily known for its work in Ukraine, where it has lost its physical foothold due to the closure of its field operations, thus needing to repurpose itself to provide effective and meaningful support to Ukraine in the future. In this challenging phase, parliamentarians can play a crucial role in raising awareness and generating political trust in the organization. In this connection, it is important to recall the many OSCE success-stories, especially activities concerning early warning and conflict prevention, which are - given the global tensions and potential for consequent economic, social and security threats - needed across the entire OSCE region. In the current climate of collapsed trust and dialogue, the OSCE will have to undergo inevitable reforms and reassess how to return to having an effective role in discussions on European security; this translates into adjusting to the new reality of momentarily “doing less for less” and being prepared to seize momentum when windows of opportunities open up to re-engage in dialogue with a focus on unifying issues.

Recommendations include engaging PA members in raising interest and awareness about the work of the organization in their respective governments and the wider public in their countries, raising visibility and providing adequate financial support to the Field Operations which make the OSCE unique and bring added value; engaging governments and Ministers more frequently and systematically through informal meetings (possibly thematic) on governmental/Ministerial level; engaging parliaments in a systematic follow-up of the implementation of OSCE/ODIHR recommendations following EOMs; enhancing cooperation with the civil society; enhancing interaction between parliamentary and governmental sides. To renew political interest in the organization and raise its profile, National Parliaments should have more hearings about the work of the OSCE, invite as appropriate OSCE representatives, putting questions to Foreign and other relevant Ministers, to create a stronger political momentum for decisions to be taken in time. Further, the OSCE needs to better connected with the people it serves, as knowledge of the OSCE is shrinking amongst civil society. In this respect, the members of the OSCE PA can take on a more active role in promoting OSCE literacy amongst civil society actors by serving as intermediators between national governments and the civil society.

Finally, the issue of complementarity between the PA and the diplomatic machinery in Vienna has been raised: how can their interaction been improved? OSCE Parliamentarians should play a key role in promoting a greater investment by governments in the OSCE. As the OSCE PA is currently engaging in a reflection on its own functions, procedures and working methods, an important task will be to build greater synergies between the two sides of the Organization, with full respect for their independence but with the common goal of improving the impact of OSCE activities. A better knowledge of the respective structures and activities will have to be the starting point of this future effort.

Lack of genuine dialogue and atmosphere of mistrust, lack of culture of compromise

Revitalizing dialogue requires political will to engage to resolve crises. The PA and its members have tools that can contribute to promoting political initiatives. It is not only important to have an inclusive OSCE but also to ensure that pS perceive the organization as an effective conflict prevention and resolution platform, thus constructively engaging in debate. However, the willingness to constructively engage is closely related to trust that lacks amongst participating states of the OSCE. At present, the Permanent Council is being used as an instrument to merely reinforce well-known national positions of individual members states instead of facilitating genuine dialogue – this phenomenon can also be observed in the OSCE PA, to counter-act mistrust, the OSCE must work towards fostering a new culture of cooperation in an extremely challenging environment. Means of informal engagement can increase trust and confidence— however, any form of engagement also implies to hear out the concerns of all participating states, upon the condition that core guiding principles are upheld. On an increasingly divided international scene, neutrality is also seen as an asset for negotiations, addressing conflicts, and global threats such as climate change and transnational threats. An event in Turkmenistan focused entirely on this aspect, which, among other considerations, highlighted the fact that neutrality, while granting a space for facilitation of dialogue, does not mean passivity and does not preclude taking a strong national stance on current events. The Ashgabat conference also pointed to the need for a continued parliamentary process of regional cooperation among central Asian countries in the framework of the OSCE.

Openness to dialogue should not mean reducing the importance of upholding OSCE values (but is there a shared understanding of these key values?) and ensuring full implementation of OSCE commitments: on the other hand, there is a concern that the “name and shame” debate pattern might be seen as a challenge to cultural and political diversity within the OSCE. these discussions lead to the organization of an event entirely devoted to the human dimension.

Opening of political discussions to the public – with the exception of negotiation processes - could enhance the Organization’s accountability and visibility, thus generating higher public interest. The OSCE PA is optimally positioned to initiate a broad debate within and between societies and to raise their understanding of security challenges. The establishment (or reactivation) of Helsinki Committees by all parliaments of the pS would be a way to revitalize the dialogue within and in connection with the OSCE. The OSCE PA could take into consideration this idea and adopt a resolution to that effect, the implementation of which would be monitored by national delegations assisted by the International Secretariat.

Inclusivity and decision-making procedures

A heated debate developed around the issue of suspension of individual countries in cases of massive violations of key OSCE principles. This debate revolved around the perception that the OSCE has no *effective enforcement mechanisms when it comes to key violations of OSCE principles and commitments*. In this debate some pointed out that the CSCE was initially conceived as a space for dialogue between adversaries and that the OSCE still carries this function in its DNA. In the 90s, the only decade in which a significant alignment of all CSCE/OSCE members materialized, mechanisms based on the notion of consensus minus one (which the PA still maintains in its decision-making process) were developed. Accordingly, the suspension of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia took place against its consent but with everybody else's agreement. Today, the wider divisions within the organization would make the adoption of similar measures virtually impossible, and even the use of existing non-consensual mechanisms, such as the Moscow mechanism, albeit still useful, becomes controversial. In addition, the consequences of suspension in terms of ability to engage in dialogue (when conditions for dialogue arise) also need to be taken into account.

In any case, *decision-making should be improved* in order to serve the main purpose of the organization, namely ensuring and maintaining peace and security of all pS. The rule of consensus reflects the inclusive nature of the Organization, as a regional security organization under Chapter VIII of the UN Charter, and provides legitimacy to decisions endorsed by all. This is particularly important when it comes to field activities (e.g. it was key to a successful deployment of SMM, particularly in the Donbass region). However, consensus has sometimes been abused, bordering on filibustering, without taking into account the imperative of ensuring that blockages are limited to issues that represent a serious security concern for the country blocking a decision. There appears to be no understanding or concern that this may undermine collective security interests of the broader OSCE community of countries. To avoid future repetition of abuse of the consensus rule, it may be necessary to introduce a notion of **accountability** for breaking consensus, encouraging the Chair to request a clear explanation of the reasons why an almost unanimous decision is opposed by any given country and, if necessary, following up with a demarche at the political level by the Chairperson-in-Office. The results of such demarche will be communicated to the whole membership, for others to take further action, if deemed appropriate. *The Parliamentary Assembly should be better used to ensure accountability in relation to the decision-making process within the OSCE*, especially with regard to countries' lack of readiness to join consensus on important decisions.

A number of Parliamentarians also believe that consensus -1/-2 procedures should be introduced by the Governmental side to improve decision-making. In addition, Chairpersonship (CiO) and/or Troika should be encouraged to consult and take decisions directly in relevant organizational and administrative areas without a need to build consensus for every one of them. Decisions could be categorized (political, security, administrative, procedural) and different decision-making procedures might be applied to different categories. Negotiation of a package deal on broad dates and main agenda items for the key annual meetings - like HDIM, ASRC, EEF, AIAM - omnibus decision in a form of a yearly calendar.

Resourcing the Organization

There are visible challenges stemming from insufficient resourcing and long-delayed budgeting of the OSCE, despite the proven efficiency of the Organization. No consensus on the unified budget has been reached since 2022 and monthly allotments have become a serious constraint to proper planning of activities. In addition, the excessive politicization of administrative processes such as approving the budget, appointing senior officials or adopting agendas of meetings have made it difficult for the OSCE to efficiently operate and maintain its activities. These *administrative matters should be dealt with in a purely administrative mode*, and the Secretary General should be allowed to play a more prominent role in this respect. In order to overcome obstacles stemming from the strict application of the consensus-rule to every aspect of the activities of the organization it would be necessary to refocus the decision making process back to fundamental security matters by focusing on a set of core issues, such as: the reconfirmation of and recommitment to principles guiding relations among States, reducing the risk of crises or armed conflicts and increase trust, confidence and predictability between participating states, strengthening cooperation across the three OSCE dimensions, addressing challenges caused by climate change, enhancing implementation of human dimension commitments, strengthening cross-border cooperation to address transnational threats, recognizing and reducing potentially harmful impacts of technology on human rights and security.

Core issues such as these could serve as the basis for an overarching agenda for cooperation, which would in turn provide the framework for a common plan of action for the next 3 Chairmanships. Any lack of agreement on the OSCE core business might create loss of focus and lead to duplication of other organizations' work. The agenda for cooperation would guide budgetary discussions of participating states and devise a 3-year strategic program outline. Instead of going year by year, a 3-year perspective would provide predictability and stability for the OSCE to carry out its activities and operate "uninterruptedly". Overall, unifying core objectives would give the OSCE a direction to re-focus on its core objective of maintaining security through cooperation.

Sustainable Development Goals

The OSCE's extensive toolbox and expertise in preventing and managing conflicts has already ensured most added value in *supporting the implementation of several SDGs* and in particular Goal 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions. Moreover, the OSCE offers a platform to bridge national and global agendas. With its institutions, field operations and activities that reinforce transboundary co-operation, it has capacities to support SDG implementation on a national level, and to foster regional cooperation, thereby contributing to the realization of a number of objectives beyond Goal 16, such as Goal 13 on climate action through country-based projects focusing on environmental security and climate change; Goal 17 on partnerships through cooperation with international and national stakeholders; Goal 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment through the implementation of UNSCR 1325 and integration of gender perspective in programmatic activities; and Goal 3 on good health and well-being through responding to COVID-19 pandemic in line with the Agenda, to name a few.

The Human Dimension

Despite many years of successful activities and good practical cooperation in the Human Dimension (HD) field, most results achieved in this dimension remain largely unknown to Parliaments (with the exception of election monitoring activities) and to the general public in many OSCE countries, while enjoying only marginal attention by most governments. OSCE PA members can therefore play an important role in better reflecting OSCE activities and challenges into the policy-making work of their respective Parliaments. For instance, it would be useful to involve PA members in the follow-up of recommendations concerning implementation of the OSCE commitments, including as a result of EOMs findings, keeping in mind the need to ensure topical and timely follow up to EOM's final report recommendations. They should also focus on encouraging their own countries to return to the original purpose of the HD meetings, which is to take stock of implementation of their own commitments instead of focusing exclusively on the lack of implementation in other states. More generally, it would be important to strengthen peer review capacities and processes, including voluntary reporting. Peer-to-peer review should return to play a central role in the OSCE's HD work, and the Parliamentary Assembly should be better used to provide a substantial encouragement to this process. Parliamentarians should also play a key role in the strengthening or establishment of civil society organizations (e.g., Helsinki Committees), providing inspiration to governmental policies in the OSCE and inputs to national Parliaments. Any potential limitation of civil society engagement in the work of the OSCE would adversely impact the ability of the Organization to take effective action to ensure protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms by all participating States.

Discussions also highlighted the potential stemming from the use of new communication technologies in raising public awareness on the work of the OSCE, leading to stronger public accountability of governments in relation to implementation of their commitments. There were proposals to develop a register/compilation of success stories in implementing HD commitments, opening it up for reference and transparency to the greater public. Moreover, a joint and sustained dialogue platform could be created as a PA initiative, intended to look into challenges, experiences and expectations for the future of the Organization in the HD and beyond, establishing a systematic follow-up procedure to elections observation and to other proposals put forward by OSCE Institutions and Field Operations.

Gender and youth

A strong gender focus in all aspects of the OSCE and the PA work should be continued, as gender mainstreaming can help promote the OSCE principles and commitments. Moreover, women's active and meaningful participation in peace processes is a crucial factor for ensuring stable and long-lasting peace, increasing the sustainability of post-conflict peace settlement. The role of Parliaments and parliamentarians in streamlining the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda in policymaking through regular parliamentary work and advocacy engagement was reaffirmed, together with the need to address all forms of social discrimination and barriers that limit the potential of women and men to meaningfully engage in all stages of the conflict cycle. Action should be taken to promote a substantial increase of the number of women

parliamentarians sitting in and chairing foreign affairs, development and budgetary parliamentary committees. There is a need for a cross-party mobilization of MPs in regard to the development, financing, implementation and monitoring of National Action Plans (NAPs) on WPS, including through mobilization of male parliamentarians in advocating and mainstreaming the WPS agenda in parliamentary work. It would be desirable to harmonize national policies with OSCE and international commitments and bring public attention to the topic, while ensuring direct and meaningful cooperation with the civil society, supporting the development of civil society platforms. OSCE Parliamentarians should make sure that adequate resources should be allocated to the effective implementation of NAPs and policies related to the WPS agenda.

There is also a need to ensure the active and meaningful involvement of **young members of Parliaments** in the work of the OSCE and of its Parliamentary Assembly. The solid expertise and well-developed toolbox of the IPU could be of assistance in this regard. It would be imperative to *begin concrete steps within the Parliamentary Assembly to create an OSCE-wide Parliamentary Youth Forum*. The Forum should be convened periodically and should provide inputs and recommendations to the decision-making organs of the OSCE PA. Ideally, the Forum should be permanently represented within relevant decision-making organs. In addition, an online platform should be established to link youth leaders and political groupings throughout the OSCE area, operating as a tool to exchange best practices and sharing experiences at the national level, but also providing a space for dialogue for young political actors across the OSCE region while mainstreaming youth perspectives into the work of the Assembly. National best practices could inspire others with a view to promoting legislative or otherwise practical steps to ensure a youth perspective in national policies. Legal and other barriers that limit the meaningful participation of young actors in the political and public life (e.g. different age limits for active and passive suffrage) should be removed. Another useful initiative would be the creation of youth civil society fora, such as Youth Helsinki Committees, which would help raise awareness and stimulate a debate among young civil society actors.

The complementarity of Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) and WPS agendas was also highlighted, with a view to develop synergies in order to ensure the active and meaningful participation of young women in policymaking.

Ukraine

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in January 2022, the Call for Action process served as the main platform for regular exchanges on the situation on the ground and for discussions on the possible role of the OSCE in general and the PA in particular. OSCE institutions as well as representatives of key international organizations active in Ukraine were invited to inform Parliamentarians of their assessments and initiatives. The PA President presented a detailed report on PA activities: ([OSCE PA Action on Ukraine](#)) which outlines the numerous initiatives undertaken by the Parliamentary Assembly in support of Ukraine. The Director of ODIHR, RFoM, HCNM and CPC Director, as well as the Project Coordinator in Ukraine all presented reports on their relevant activities. Parliamentarians voiced their concern about the dire humanitarian situation in Ukraine and discussed options for the OSCE to play a more visible role to assist. The CfA focus on Ukraine will continue as long as necessary.

The future: reforming the OSCE?

In the course of a recent meeting, a panellist outlined 4 possible scenarios for the future of the OSCE:

1. Marriage of Convenience – pS keep the organisation afloat, but are unable to discuss relevant issues. They agree on key steps, so they make silent concessions e.g. lowest common denominator in election four key posts. This may result in weak leadership and mean that the organisation has no impact.
2. Zombie – pS discuss, but are unable to reach any decisions at Permanent Council and Ministerial Council levels. No appointment of four key posts, no CiO for 2024 and 2026, no Unified Budget, no Field Operations and no HDIM. There may be some results at activity level, but without any significant political impact.
3. The Abyss – Russia no longer engaged in OSCE matters or dialogue and no constructive cooperation ideas from Western countries. No existential OSCE decisions are taken, rendering the OSCE non-functional. There would be non-consensual continuation of activities or announcements of their “temporary suspension”.
4. Phoenix – consensus on all key decisions and OSCE acts as a successful broker of a peace agreement between Russia and Ukraine. Renewal of Helsinki Final Act spirit and collective reflection on the best way to overcome organisational deficiencies.

The resolution of current challenges such as the agreement on the budget, on a new Chair, the extension of the Heads of Institutions appointments and Field Operations’ mandates are key to retain a functional and inclusive OSCE as an important and impactful regional security organization. In the wake of the conclusion of the war in Ukraine there will have to be a clear recommitment by all to multilateralism and to the key principles underpinning peaceful relations within the OSCE community. In this context, there would be a need to relook at the functioning of the organization. There is plenty of practical recommendations, including by High-level experts nominated by countries or invited by Chairmanships, by former Secretary-Generals and other Heads of OSCE institutions, such as the Call for Action issued in December 2020 by former OSCE leaders. A high-level group should be set-up to evaluate key proposals and put forward an extensive reform of the organization, to improve efficiency and effectiveness, without losing sight of its current, obvious strengths. OSCE Parliamentarians should recognise the particular relevance of the organization in this difficult juncture and should mobilize to generate much needed progress on these key issues.