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## **REPORT**

**FOR THE GENERAL COMMITTEE ON  
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND  
HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS**

***“COMMEMORATING 50 YEARS OF THE HELSINKI FINAL ACT:  
RESPONDING TO A NEW REALITY IN THE OSCE”***

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# **REPORT FOR THE GENERAL COMMITTEE ON DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN QUESTIONS**

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## **i. Commemorating 50 Years of the Helsinki Final Act**

As we gather in Porto for the 32nd Annual Session of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, we also commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, a milestone that helped shape the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security, which is built on the understanding that democracy and human rights are prerequisites for sustainable peace.

For half a century, these principles have guided our actions and the work of our Organization. However, as we reflect on this legacy, we must confront the pressing challenges we face today, which reflect a reality that falls short of the aspirations we set for our region 50 years ago.

Today, the OSCE stands at a crossroads, facing significant threats to the values we uphold. War has returned to the region, and gross violations of international humanitarian law are being committed by and within OSCE participating States, marking a major setback in our collective progress toward peace and human security. Our rules-based world order is being challenged in favor of “might makes right”. Human rights and fundamental freedoms are increasingly under attack as democratic institutions weaken, civil society faces violent repression, independent media is silenced, political dissidents are imprisoned, and minorities and vulnerable groups are targeted throughout our region. Moreover, critical challenges pertaining to migration and displacement and human rights issues posed by artificial intelligence (AI) are further exacerbating the security threats we are facing.

Given these profound challenges, the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act is not only a moment for reflection, but also a critical opportunity for action for OSCE participating States to reaffirm their human dimension commitments and strengthen efforts to honor their internationally binding human rights obligations. Aiding these efforts, as parliamentarians of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, we must fully leverage the power of parliamentary diplomacy in view of our collective responsibility to uphold the principles enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act.

## **ii. Protecting People in Armed Conflict**

While identifying the most pressing human rights challenges in our region is undoubtedly a complex task, it is clear that the ongoing suffering caused by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, now entering its fourth year, must compel us to prioritize the acute humanitarian situation in our discussions and actions. The

impact of the conflict is immense, with millions of lives uprooted and countless civilians enduring unimaginable hardships. The scale of the devastation is staggering: 6.8 million Ukrainians have sought refuge abroad, while 3.6 million remain displaced within their own country. Over 17,500 civilians have lost their lives as a result of the conflict, and among the most vulnerable are women and children, who are facing disproportionately high risks of violence, exploitation, and forced displacement.

Extensive reports from Ukraine of deliberate killings, torture, forced deportations, conflict-related sexual violence, and other severe human rights abuses are deeply troubling, and often highlight the continued and systematic targeting of vulnerable populations. In particular, the devastating impact of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation on children, who continue to suffer disproportionately from the violence, is both shocking and intolerable. Thousands have been killed or injured in attacks on civilian infrastructure, including homes, schools, and hospitals, while many more face long-term psychological trauma and displacement. Alarming reports indicating that over 20,000 Ukrainian children have been unlawfully transferred to Russian-occupied territories or to the Russian Federation – actions that constitute serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, including the Geneva Conventions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, underscoring the urgent need for co-ordinated international efforts to secure the safe return of all affected children and to ensure full accountability for those responsible.

Looking forward, it is crucial that we maximize our parliamentary influence to support and strengthen legal frameworks - whether through national, regional, or international judicial channels - to enable the thorough investigation and the establishment of robust accountability mechanisms to address the atrocities committed in Ukraine and ensure these crimes are not left unpunished.

Within our Assembly, the Parliamentary Support Team for Ukraine continues to play a crucial role in addressing human rights violations in Ukraine through strengthening the OSCE PA's practical and political efforts in support of the country. At the same time, we must also aim to further enhance our collaboration with OSCE executive bodies, institutions, and key external partners to bolster Ukraine's resilience and advance its recovery efforts.

There is an opportunity for the prolonged conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia to be resolved, as discussions between both countries resulted in the finalization of the draft text of the “Agreement on Peace and Establishment of Interstate Relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan”, a peace agreement that is yet to be ratified by both countries. In order to secure long-term and sustainable peace, a number of remaining questions need to be addressed to ensure respect for human rights and adherence to humanitarian law. It is imperative that refugees and IDPs who have been forced to leave their homes are ensured the right to return. Further, prisoners of war and

other detainees must be guaranteed fair trials, humane treatment, and the ability to communicate with their families.

More than a year and a half after the 7 October 2023 terrorist attack carried out by Hamas, the Middle East remains highly volatile, with Gaza's humanitarian crisis growing increasingly severe. Despite diplomatic efforts, including the January 2025 ceasefire agreement, there has been no meaningful progress, but unfathomable civilian harm and a staggering loss of life: the ongoing captivity of hostages, blocked humanitarian aid, and staggering loss of life – including tens of thousands of children – highlight the urgent need for our Assembly to prioritize this crisis, especially given the risk of regional spillovers.

UN reports estimate over 50,000 Palestinians, including 14,000 children, have been killed, with nearly 80% of Gaza's population – more than 1.9 million people – displaced. Massive destruction of infrastructure has crippled access to healthcare, shelter, and clean water, while over 2 million face acute food insecurity. Hostages remain held in alarming conditions, with credible reports of abuse and threats of execution – serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law requiring immediate and unconditional release.

The ICC's issuance of arrest warrants on 21 November 2024 for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and Hamas commander Mohammed Deif for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity further underscores the conflict's gravity and the need for full accountability.

Given this deterioration, we must continue to advocate for full implementation of the ceasefire – including unconditional release of hostages and unrestricted humanitarian aid – and strongly support the use of international legal mechanisms to investigate, prosecute, and hold all perpetrators accountable for serious violations of international law.

### **iii. Freedom of Association, Assembly, and Expression**

While freedom of association, assembly, and expression, including an independent press, are fundamental to democracy and security, developments within OSCE participating States reveal that the space for independent media and civil society is continually and rapidly shrinking.

In numerous OSCE participating States, government efforts to suppress independent media are intensifying. These efforts are characterized by increased surveillance, restrictive media laws, and the prosecution of journalists and media workers who challenge authorities. In the Russian Federation and Belarus, state control over media has reached near-totality, forcing independent outlets to entirely shut down. Yet, this issue extends far beyond these examples. Journalists across OSCE participating States face growing threats, including harassment, legal intimidation, physical attacks, invasive surveillance, unlawful detentions, and,

in some cases, fatal violence. As a direct result, in numerous participating States, the press can no longer freely fulfill its essential role of providing accurate information to the public and holding those in power accountable.

As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM) has emphasized, while some OSCE participating States show encouraging signs of progress and resilience, these instances are isolated and do not alter the broader, negative trend as it pertains to media freedom. Among the various challenges to democratic norms, freedom of expression remains one of the most vulnerable and severely affected areas.

Given these developments, it is essential to keep the protection of journalists and media workers at the forefront of our efforts. To strengthen these initiatives, we should actively draw on the expertise of the RFoM, whose guidance on legislative and regulatory frameworks can support participating States in safeguarding media independence.

As digital technologies evolve, we must also be mindful of the growing threats to media freedom and the diversity of voices in the digital space. The rise of artificial intelligence, in particular, presents serious risks, such as the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of content. AI can quickly generate and distribute fake news, amplifying false narratives and creating confusion. If not properly managed, this could undermine media freedom and hinder access to reliable information, weakening democratic decision-making.

Another critical issue is the political persecution of dissenting voices in the OSCE region. Opposition figures, political dissidents, human rights defenders, and individuals involved in activities such as human rights work, political opposition, or engagement with national or international bodies too often face threats, reprisals and violence. In some cases, authorities have gone as far as amending laws to label these individuals as extremists or terrorists. In his report, our Assembly's Special Representative on Political Prisoners, Steven Cohen (United States), highlighted that this issue is not only increasing but also becoming more entrenched within the OSCE region.

A recent example of this can be seen in Georgia, where protests erupted following the contentious 26 October 2024 parliamentary elections. These protests were met with excessive force, arbitrary detentions, and the total lack of respect for peaceful assembly, reflecting a disturbing trend of repressing dissent, stifling free expression, and undermining the fundamental right to protest. As a result, Georgians are being pushed to increasingly desperate forms of protest, such as detained journalist Mzia Amaglobeli's 38-day hunger strike, highlighting the growing risks individuals face when voicing opposition.

In both Russia and Belarus, the situation is even more dire, where protesting or assembling in opposition has become nearly impossible. The authorities have instituted violent crackdowns on any form of resistance, using force to suppress

protests and intimidate those daring to challenge the regime. These actions not only silence opposition but also instill fear, further curtailing the basic freedoms that are essential to any democratic society.

The targeting of dissent and violent crackdowns extends beyond individuals to civil society organizations, which are increasingly facing a growing range of threats. We are witnessing governments weaponizing so-called "foreign agent" laws to falsely label entire organizations as threats to national security. These laws are often presented under the guise of protecting national security, but in reality, they serve as tools to discredit and silence groups advocating for human rights, democracy, and transparency. Such laws must be repealed, as they not only undermine the foundation of political and civic freedoms but have also led to organizations in several participating States facing harassment, legal actions, and forced shutdowns.

While states have a legitimate duty to ensure national security, the misuse of laws to curtail basic freedoms clearly violates international human rights obligations. A vibrant and independent civil society is crucial for protecting human rights, holding governments accountable, and upholding democratic values. We must take further action to defend these organizations, protect their work, and ensure that civic engagement is not met with repression, but instead create environments where civic participation is encouraged, safeguarded, and contributes to more transparent and accountable political systems. This is particularly crucial as we are witnessing the shutdown of key institutions that are essential for the development of democracy.

#### **iv. Minorities and Vulnerable Groups**

As we witness a growing assault on human rights and fundamental freedoms within the OSCE region, it is crucial to emphasize that it is minorities and vulnerable groups who suffer the most.

Across the region, we are observing troubling shifts in legislation that disproportionately target these communities, particularly LGBTI individuals. Numerous countries have introduced laws that restrict basic rights, including marriage, adoption, and gender-affirming care. Some laws even criminalize advocacy for these rights, while others impose stringent limitations on discussions about related issues in education, media, and public life. Hungary, for example, has recently passed legislation in parliament to ban Pride marches, further curtailing freedom of expression and assembly. These trends have not only contributed to the erosion of legal recognition for same-sex couples but have also further marginalized transgender individuals and fueled discrimination, exclusion, and violence. As parliamentarians, we must raise our voices in defence of this community's rights, pushing for strong protections that ensure the rights of all individuals – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – are upheld.

In addition, refugees, migrants, and individuals without legal status remain among the most vulnerable groups within the OSCE region, with millions displaced due to conflict, economic instability, and climate change. In 2024 alone, over 270,000 arrivals were recorded along Mediterranean routes, with thousands tragically losing their lives at sea. The war in Ukraine has exacerbated this crisis, resulting in nearly 7 million Ukrainians seeking refuge abroad and an estimated 3.6 million displaced within the country. As parliamentarians, we have a vital role to play in addressing the challenges faced by refugees and migrants, particularly the urgent need for stronger protection measures for women and children, who are disproportionately at risk of exploitation, trafficking, and violence. We must advocate for comprehensive migration policies that prioritize safe pathways, uphold the principle of non-refoulement, and ensure the humane treatment of refugees and migrants, in line with our international human rights obligations and OSCE commitments.

Further, individuals continue to face violence, discrimination, and persecution because of religion or beliefs. Jewish, Muslim, minority Christian communities, and other religious groups are increasingly targeted through physical attacks, verbal abuse, and even murder. In some cases, governments have imposed restrictive laws that limit religious expression, while online platforms have become breeding grounds for hate speech, conspiracy theories, and incitement to violence. The recent rise in intolerance not only threatens individual freedoms but also undermines social cohesion and peace. We must condemn all acts of violence and discrimination based on religion or belief, ensure perpetrators are held accountable, and work towards fostering a climate of mutual respect and tolerance.

The ongoing targeting of minorities and vulnerable groups remains a troubling and persistent issue across the OSCE region. To better address these challenges, we must strengthen collaboration with civil society, non-governmental organizations, and other relevant external actors representing affected groups, leveraging the resources and mechanisms within our Assembly. Additionally, it is crucial that we explore opportunities for deeper engagement with the ODIHR, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) and OSCE executive structures, which are essential partners in driving meaningful progress on these critical issues.

#### **v. Women's Rights and Gender Equality**

2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, a critical framework for advancing women's rights and gender equality. While the OSCE region has made significant progress in promoting the rights of women and girls over the past three decades, challenges remain. Women continue to be underrepresented in political and public life in many participating States, with gender-based discriminatory policies often hindering their full participation in decision-making processes. In many areas, these barriers extend to the economic sphere, where women face unequal access to opportunities, resources, and

leadership roles. This lack of representation and support limits women's ability to influence policies and shape their economic futures.

In conflict zones, the vulnerability of women and girls intensifies. They are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence, including sexual violence, and frequently lack adequate protection or support. In these contexts, women often face even more severe barriers to accessing healthcare, education, and justice. Addressing these challenges requires urgent action to not only protect women and girls from violence but also ensure their equal legal protection and full participation in political, economic, and social life. It is essential that we foster an environment where women and girls can thrive in all aspects of public, political, and economic spheres, and fully contribute to the advancement of society.

#### **vi. Enhancing and Protecting the OSCE Human Dimension**

As parliamentarians representing nearly a billion citizens, we bear the responsibility of safeguarding their rights and freedoms. This duty aligns with the values and commitments at the core of the OSCE, and the urgency of this responsibility has never been clearer given the current climate of war and rising repression in the OSCE region.

Within our Assembly, this responsibility calls for intensified efforts in the General Committee on Democracy, Human Rights, and Humanitarian Questions, as well as through Ad Hoc committees and relevant Special Representatives, to address urgent human rights challenges and advocate through all available avenues to uphold respect for human rights and ensure accountability. Moreover, we should strive to bolster our collaboration with OSCE executive structures and the autonomous institutions, particularly ODIHR, and build on our valuable, longstanding partnership in election observation missions to amplify our impact in promoting human rights and accountability.

Enhanced efforts are crucial given years of democratic backsliding within the OSCE area, as well as the systematic misuse of the consensus rule and the politicized blockage of the budget, which have led to a deadlock and continue to obstruct the critical work of the OSCE's institutions and its field operations, particularly in the area of human rights. Therefore, it is essential for us to actively contribute to this process in every possible way. A key part of this effort is our unwavering support for, and advocacy on behalf of, the OSCE's autonomous institutions – specifically the ODIHR, the RFoM, and the HCNM – to preserve their strong mandates and ensure their effective functioning.

As the parliamentary dimension of the OSCE, we have a unique responsibility to break these deadlocks and provide the political momentum needed to address the diplomatic impasse caused by Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine and the ongoing delays in adopting the organization's budget. In doing so, we must explore parliamentary avenues to advocate for increased high-level engagement, essential

to overcoming the crisis the Organization is facing. This is also important as we support the priorities of the Finnish 2025 Chairmanship, which is committed to strengthening the human dimension as a central focus of the OSCE's work.

Beyond that, we must also champion external partners, particularly at a time when international organizations and non-governmental organizations are under attack, underfunded, and questioned. These organizations are key actors in addressing human rights challenges, and we must support their vital role in advancing human rights standards, enhancing co-operation, and pursuing accountability to uphold universal human rights norms enshrined in international law.

Our dedication to human rights is paramount in safeguarding the people of the OSCE region, who are directly impacted by threats to their rights and humanitarian concerns. These challenges have deep, often devastating consequences on their daily lives, making it critical that we prioritize the protection and dignity of the citizens we serve above all else.