

# Introduction to *OSCE Insights 2023: Adapting to Change*

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Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine continued throughout 2023, with negative consequences for the OSCE. Although this was the biggest problem faced by the OSCE, there were others as well. These included resistance from many participating States to free elections, media freedom, and other democratic norms promoted by the OSCE.

And yet, 2023 looked less grim than 2022 with regard to the OSCE’s ability to survive war and authoritarianism and to remain vital, that is, to take decisions and run activities. In late 2023, governments at the Ministerial Council meeting in Skopje resolved the main obstacle to maintaining the OSCE as a vital organization. They agreed on Malta as the Chair for 2024 and extended the mandates of the Secretary General and the heads of the three institutions. Shortly after, par-

ticipating States also prolonged the mandates of the field operations.

To be sure, success was partial. The mandates of the top four positions were only extended until September 2024, and, as it had in December 2022, Russia only agreed to extend the OSCE Mission to Moldova for six months. By the fall of 2023 it was also becoming clear that a consensus decision on the OSCE’s 2023 regular budget could not be reached. By the end of the year, however, a compromise on the 2024 regular budget seemed possible. Generally, in 2023 the OSCE proved its resilience to a combination of factors that could have led to its demise.

Contributors to the 2023 edition of *OSCE Insights* examine a range of topics: the Transdnistria conflict, OSCE election observation, the OSCE’s consensus rule, budgeting in the OSCE, back-channel negotiations on the war against Ukraine, the OSCE’s role in Ukraine, conventional arms control, and the link between gender inequalities and corruption. The diversity of topics, recommendations, and methodologies notwithstanding, the papers shed light on three themes: a) the drivers of change in the

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OSCE area, b) how participating States and the OSCE have adapted to these changes, and c) the opportunities that change offers to the OSCE.

### Drivers of change

The primary cause of change in the OSCE area remains Russia's war against Ukraine. Nadja Douglas and Stefan Wolff show how this war has made the Transnistrian conflict more volatile. Gabriela Rosa Hernández demonstrates how the crisis in relations between Russia and Western states has led to a near-total collapse of the conventional arms control regime in Europe, the continuing selective implementation of the Vienna Document notwithstanding. The war has also fundamentally changed the OSCE's engagement in Ukraine, as Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff demonstrate.

But Russia's war against Ukraine is not the only driver of change. Daniela Donno analyzes how Russia and like-minded states have been challenging ODIHR election observation since the early 2000s, with the aim of weakening its independence. In addition, there were external challenges, especially alternative election monitoring that countered ODIHR's assessments. Ronny Patz also shows that the OSCE has been facing challenges for a long time—in his case with regard to budgeting and resourcing. For example, participating States have managed to adopt the Unified Budget on time (i.e., before the start of the new budget year) only seven times since 2002. Since 2014, the main causes of the breakdown of

budget routines were Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In her analysis of OSCE research efforts to better understand the nexus between gender inequality and corruption, Arianna Briganti hints at growing awareness of this link as a driver of OSCE activities in this field. This awareness has been spurred by societal changes such as increasing reliance on the provision of public education.

### Adapting to change

Several authors of the 2023 edition of *OSCE Insights* show how Ukraine's Western supporters, and OSCE structures and institutions, have responded to Russia's war against Ukraine. Rick Fawn examines a core OSCE rule: consensus decision-making. The OSCE has shown much "inventiveness" in applying, and also circumventing, this principle in order to maintain the OSCE's vitality. Notable examples of activities that have tweaked the consensus rule include the Human Dimension meeting in Warsaw and the Support Programme for Ukraine (funded through extrabudgetary contributions). In their *OSCE Insights* contribution, Malyarenko and Wolff offer a detailed analysis of the Support Programme for Ukraine, listing projects, funding, and timelines.

Other authors examine adaptations to different changes. Donno reveals how ODIHR has adapted to challenges related to election observation, which produced "a story of resilience and continued vitality against difficult odds." Adaptive

responses included sending election observers to established democracies, increasing the number of observers from post-Soviet countries, and increasing transparency and the consistency of election evaluations. These adaptations did not go so far, however, as to compromise ODIHR's election evaluation standards, the autonomy of observation missions, or the practice of publishing preliminary statements after elections. Patz reveals how participating States that want OSCE activities to continue (especially Ukraine's Western allies), together with OSCE structures and institutions, have responded to budget impasses. Thus, the Support Programme for Ukraine represents an innovative scheme for employing voluntary funding. Briganti demonstrates how the OSCE has responded to growing awareness of the link between gender inequalities and corruption by initiating research to shed light on this nexus.

## Opportunities for the OSCE

The political upheaval caused by Russia's aggression, along with other changes, has weakened the OSCE in many areas. It has also given rise to opportunities, though. Studying the Transnistria conflict, Douglas and Wolff argue that the political dynamics caused by Russia's war against Ukraine have created a "window of opportunity" for Chisinau and Tiraspol and for international actors, including the OSCE, to support intensified confidence building. Fawn provides recommendations on how the OSCE can con-

tinue to expand its activities even without consensus, if need be. He sees opportunities in the Western Balkans, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus, as well as in specific fields such as higher education. He also points out, however, that non-consensus activities should be exceptional and supported by a large majority of participating States. Patz formulates recommendations on how the OSCE might deal with its budgetary travails. These include shifting to an integrated budgeting process and setting up a better resource mobilization function.

P. Terrence Hopmann points to another opportunity for the OSCE: the provision of a venue for "preliminary, informal, and discreet" back-channel pre-negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. These conversations can, Hopmann argues, pave the way for formal negotiations to end Russia's war against Ukraine. Back-channel talks would not require the OSCE to play a formal role and could be limited to the provision of good offices by the OSCE or participating States. Such talks are not intended to resolve the conflict; they are rather "negotiations *about* negotiations," the aim of which is to lay the ground for formal negotiations when domestic politics in Russia and Ukraine allow for it. For Hopmann, Vienna and its surroundings are ideal for such back-channel talks.

Malyarenko and Wolff identify opportunities for the OSCE in Ukraine. They single out the reintegration of Ukrainian society and its path to EU accession as areas where the OSCE can add value. This is not least because in these areas the OSCE can draw on experiences from

the Western Balkans and the Baltic states since the 1990s, in particular as regards national minorities, legislative reform, and media freedom.

Hernández looks at another area where Russia's war against Ukraine seemingly leaves no political space: arms control and confidence- and security-building measures. However, while the conventional arms control regime in Europe has broken down, Hernández shows that conventional arms control tools can still be used on an ad hoc basis, even in times of war. Participating States can use such tools for signaling and monitoring, which contributes to preventing false alarms and military incidents.

## Acknowledgements

Producing a policy paper series on an organization that is off the radar of most researchers, even those who specialize in international organizations, is not easy. In addition to finding authors who are interested in, and knowledgeable about, the OSCE, high levels of politicization in Vienna and at the capital level posed a challenge to producing *OSCE Insights* 2023. Politicization tends to reduce appetite for critical analysis, even for papers that offer constructive recommendations and represent the views of the authors alone—as is the case with *OSCE Insights* papers.

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