

OSCE

Focus 2019

Building a Vision of the Future

Conference Report



The conference venue: Villa Moynier
in Parc Mon Repos, Geneva.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

This report was prepared by the Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, at the request of DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions of the foreign ministries of Albania, Italy, Slovakia, or Switzerland, nor those of the CSS, DCAF, or any of the OSCE Focus 2019 conference participants. The report summarizes some of the main themes, conclusions, and considerations of the event to stimulate further work on European security and the role of the OSCE.

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The OSCE Focus 2019 at a Glance

Held on 18-19 October at Villa Moynier in Geneva, the OSCE Focus 2019 conference was dedicated to the theme 'Building a Vision of the Future'. Over 45 high-ranking participants from the OSCE community, including Secretary General Thomas Greminger, engaged in focused, open, and frank discussions on the challenges and opportunities currently faced by the organization. This report summarizes key reflections made and considerations put forward during the conference. The workshop was organized by the DCAF - Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance with support from, and in close collaboration with, the ministries of foreign affairs of Italy, Slovakia, Albania and Switzerland, along with the Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich.

The Participants

The participants of the OSCE Focus 2019 were representatives of the OSCE participating States, including Albania, Austria, Canada, the Netherlands, France, Ireland, Norway, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland, Tajikistan, the United States of America and Ukraine. In addition, senior officials of the OSCE executive structures attended the conference, including the Secretary General, the Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre and the First Deputy Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The conference was also attended by representatives of multilateral organizations, civil society and the think tank community.

The Programme

The conference was titled: 'Building a Vision of the Future'. The programme included six topics featuring three panellists and one moderator. The six topics were: 'Great power politics: implications for the OSCE'; 'The Crisis in and around Ukraine: What role for the OSCE?'; 'Wither arms control, disarmament and CSBMs?'; 'How to make the OSCE Chairmanship more attractive?'; 'Multilateral organisations and cooperative security'; and 'The OSCE in 2025'.

About the OSCE Focus Conference Series

Since 2011, DCAF has organized the annual OSCE Focus conference series in Geneva. The conference series has established itself as an important forum for representatives of the OSCE Chairs, executive structures and participating States, as well as experts from the think tank community to review the role of the OSCE and discuss key themes for the coming year. Conducted under Chatham House Rules, the two-day retreat-type meetings provide an opportunity to reflect critically on the fundamentals of the OSCE, sound out new ideas and take a fresh look at 'old' problems. They also prove extremely useful in 'passing the baton' to the next OSCE Chair.



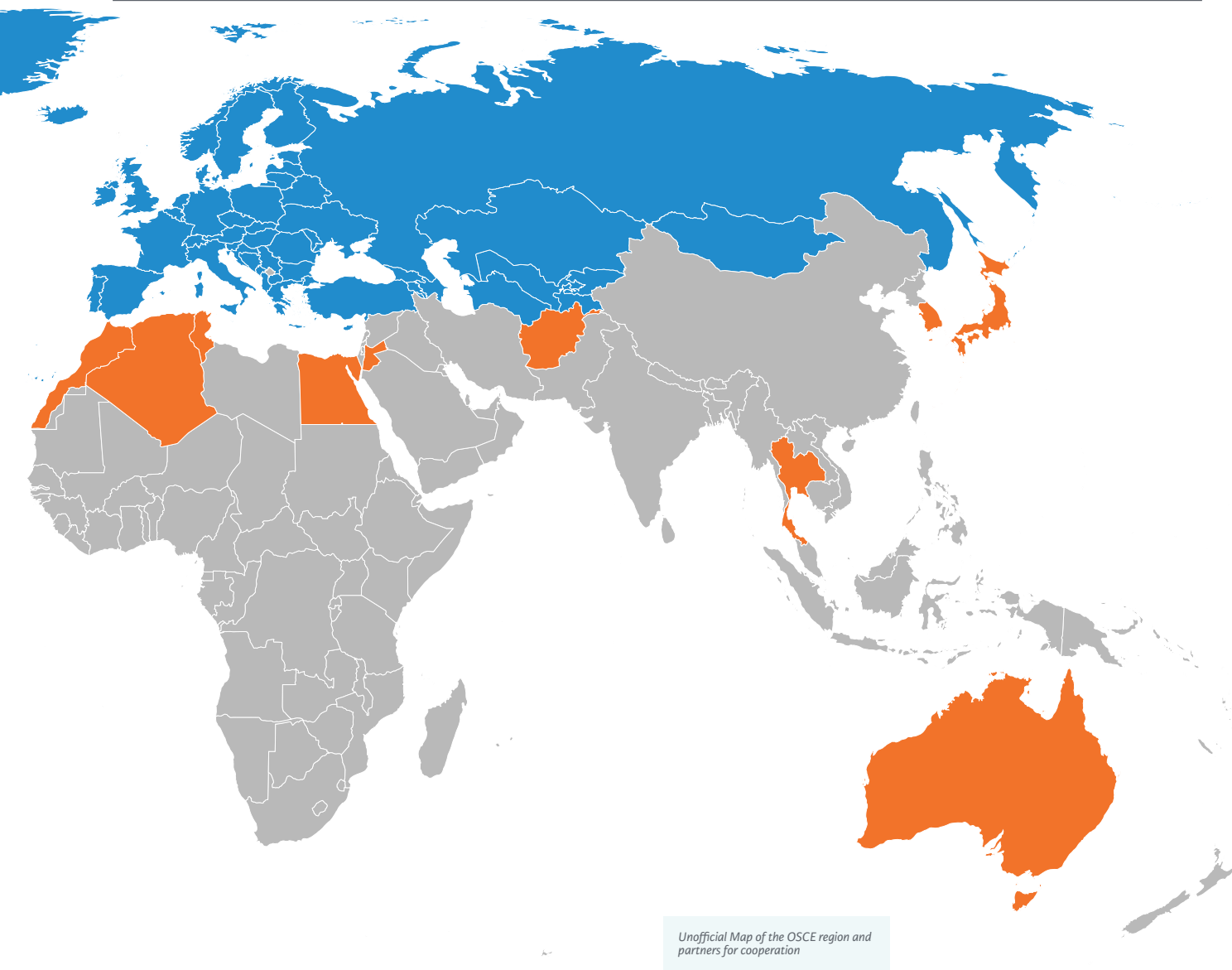
Introduction

The 2019 OSCE Focus Conference “Building a Vision for the Future” was organized by DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance with support from, and in close collaboration with, the ministries of foreign affairs of Albania, Italy, Slovakia, and Switzerland, along with the Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich. The conference brought together around 45 participants, including official representatives from OSCE participating States, representatives of the OSCE, and members of the academic and think-tank community. Its aim was to create a space for frank debate and direct interaction among diplomats, and between diplomats and experts, outside of the usual dialogue platform in Vienna.

On the one hand, the conference sought to reflect critically on challenges in today’s environment. International relations are marked by a resurgence in great power politics, pressure on multilateralism, and by a breakdown in cooperation across many fields, including arms control and European security. In such an environment, the inclusive nature of the consensus-based OSCE can become a hindrance: decision-making is often hampered by adversarial rhetoric, cumbersome budgeting processes, or tit-for-tat exchanges.

On the other hand, as the title emphasizes, this year’s OSCE Focus Conference highlighted the need and desire for solutions and a positive vision for the future of the organization and its work. The important role of the OSCE in Ukraine and new impetus for the stalled peace process in Ukraine were cited, as well as efforts by the Slovak chairmanship in fields such as conflict prevention. This fed into a debate on how to make the chairmanship more attractive and develop a positive outlook and vision for the OSCE, which in 2025 will celebrate the 50-year anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act.

In his traditional dinner speech, OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger picked up this theme and advocated an approach guided by a mix of realism and vision. He emphasized the valuable platform provided by the OSCE for dealing with many of today’s challenges through formats



such as the Minsk Process on Nagorno-Karabakh, the 5+2 format in Moldova, or the Structured Dialogue. Instead of great power competition, he called for more great power engagement in the OSCE, while also recognizing the important role played by small- and medium-sized States. He also invoked China's increasing international presence as both a challenge and an opportunity for OSCE participating States, requiring cognizance of the potential pitfalls as well as the potential for connectivity and combating violent extremism.

His conclusion conveyed the need for both realism and a vision for the OSCE. He warned that common commitments are in danger of being undermined if the current trajectory is maintained. He also emphasized that a post-Ukraine-crisis OSCE will need to deal with challenges such as climate change and

the effect of technology on human rights. However, it can use its strength as an inclusive platform to develop Confidence- and Security-Building Measures and work closely with a wide range of actors, including civil society, the private sector, and other institutions to foster connectivity and to work toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

During the conference's six focused discussion panels, several opportunities were recognized and many innovative proposals were put forward. This report elaborates on the concerns and ideas raised in the five thematic panels and then concludes with a summary of the final discussion on possible visions for the OSCE. We hope that these ideas will feed into the Ministerial Council (MC) in Bratislava on 5–6 December 2019 and inspire the Albanian chairmanship of the OSCE in 2020.

1 Great Power Politics: Implications for the OSCE

The current international system is marked by increasing great power competition, with the US, Russia, China, and, to some extent, the EU as major actors. At the same time, nationalism is on the rise and trust has been eroded both within and between states, as well as toward multilateral organizations. Furthermore, established, stabilizing patterns of power relationships are altering, and so are the rationales and calculations underlying the use of force. By emphasizing the possibility of surgical warfare through modern technology (including nuclear weapons) and by negating the mutual benefits of close economic cooperation, conflicts may be perceived as increasingly beneficial. As such, states and multilateral institutions have a harder time countering a perception of zero-sum, transactional international relations.

It was noted, however, that this is hardly new: most of modern history has been characterized by some kind of great power competition, and the CSCE/OSCE was actually established in such a context. By its structure, it incentivizes participating States not to think in binary terms, for example, Russia against the West. It encourages the inclusion of transnational

challenges into their considerations, such as the emergence of new technologies or the growing influence of non-state actors. In particular, the OSCE needs to avoid the stalling of peace processes and mediation due to great power rivalries. A combination of formal and informal channels can be used to that end. It should emphasize its unique value as a format where non-like-minded states gather and interact on a regular basis.

Given the ongoing tensions between Russia and the West – the “elephant” in any OSCE room – the OSCE is confronted with a contested history, for which no commonly recognized narrative is tangible. Despite this, it was stressed that ways of overcoming disputes about the past need to be found, rather than trying to change each other’s attitudes, as well as discussing ways to make sure that conflict can be avoided and that space for the human dimension (in mediation or peace processes, for example) remains open. Not talking to each other is not an option, particularly within an organization like the OSCE, while a firm stance on non-compliance with its norms and commitments needs to be upheld.



OSCE Focus 2019 conference
Photo: DCAF

The emerging role of China on the international stage has had effects across the OSCE space and discussing its effects on the organization itself was encouraged. China tries to convey an image of a peaceful rise focusing on the mutual benefits of cooperation, of being keen on economic liberalization while opposing political liberalization, and of upholding UN commitments. Through this image, China is emphasizing its role as an equal in a UN-based system long characterized by Western dominance. However, this positive image often collides with concerns, for example, in regard to China's potentially different interpretation of the international norms that underpin both the UN and the OSCE. Given that these norms are also interpreted differently among OSCE participating States themselves, the organization faces the challenge of recognizing China's growing role and influence, and the opportunities this creates, particularly for middle-income States in transition, while remaining true to its fundamental values and ensuring that these are understood, both within the OSCE and in its external relations.

2 The Crisis in and around Ukraine: What Role for the OSCE?

The second panel discussed the conflict cycle toolbox of the OSCE and its deployment in the crisis in and around Ukraine. Several participants voiced praise for the ongoing and strenuous work by the OSCE's negotiators and monitors, and emphasized the quality of the information the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) gathers. Generally speaking, elements of success and failure of the OSCE's work in Ukraine are usually intertwined.

A cease-fire recommitment in July 2019 had dramatically reduced the number of cease-fire violations, but it broke down soon thereafter. Nonetheless, a resumption of a disengagement process based on the 2016 framework agreement in conflict areas has been observed. These disengagement areas, however, require additional resources from

the already stretched SMM. The surprisingly quick repair of the bridge across the contact line at Stanytsia Luhanska was cited as a small, but tangible element of progress benefiting the civilian population. At the same time, the economic blockade endures and the implementation of economic aspects of the Minsk Agreements have stalled. Recent commitment to the so-called "Steinmeier formula", which sequences steps outlined by the Minsk Agreements, represents a big step forward in the conflict resolution process. However, obtaining domestic support, communicating its meaning, and implementing the special status law, amnesty, and local elections is challenging.

Apart from the conflict, which is the OSCE's priority in Ukraine, the work of the OSCE Project Co-ordinator in Ukraine in fields



such as the rule of law, education, and environment – both at a national and regional level – was emphasized. Such issues are of concern to Ukrainian citizens, but may also be of concern on both sides of the contact line, particularly with regard to humanitarian demining and the potential environmental hazard posed by defunct factories. These fields of action, for example with regard to the rule of law and the need to further increase trust in the judiciary, also rely on constitutional arrangements and the election procedures and standards that would underlie an implementation of the Minsk Agreements.

The scope and limits of the OSCE's role in the conflict were discussed. The OSCE matters both as a platform for dialogue as well as a conflict manager on the ground. However,

it only has limited access to the area and cannot enforce security arrangements, which can only be achieved through political will by all parties concerned. The OSCE's role in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements, for example as organizer or observer of elections following the implementation of the "Steinmeier formula" – with a potential additional role played by the UN – requires clarification, as does the actual substance of the steps outlined in the formula. It was highlighted that elections, if they can be conducted, must avoid being perceived as a window-dressing exercise. Essentially, most of the OSCE's work on the conflict in and around Ukraine is dedicated to conflict management and mitigation rather than solving the conflict, given the lack of necessary political will.



Flags of the 57 OSCE participating States
Photo: OSCE/Mikhail Evstafiev

3 Whither Arms Control, Disarmament, and CSBMs?

Arms control, disarmament, and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) have been one of the pillars of security in Europe. They are at the core of the work undertaken by the OSCE's Forum for Security-Cooperation. Currently, such arms control regimes are under unprecedented pressure: the US has abandoned the INF treaty citing prior Russian violations, Russia has suspended the CFE treaty, and the Open Skies Treaty is increasingly in question. The threat of the use of nuclear weapons is perceived as higher than in decades. Moreover, the willingness to use such weapons has actually increased. Despite the common desire to avoid conflict, the delicate balance between deterrence and cooperation in Europe is changing. The shift towards a multipolar world and the erosion of transatlantic cohesion will have further implications for the stability of Europe.

At the same time, there are strong efforts to modernize the Vienna Document, one of the OSCE's most crucial agreements, also with an eye to technical and technological developments. However, Russia is currently blocking efforts to update the Vienna Document.

There was also a debate about potential regional arrangements. Some participants argued that security cannot be divided and that any perception of regional buffer zones or even spheres of influence must be avoided. It was further noted that positive examples from other regions may be used as guidance and that Europe cannot revive arms control alone. Others, while agreeing with those concerns, argued in favor of regional risk reduction measures in contact areas. It was stressed that contact zones do not imply buffer zones and that the NATO-Russia Founding Act also contained subregional





OSCE Focus 2019 conference
Photo: DCAF

4 How to Make the OSCE Chairmanship More Attractive?

To date, Switzerland, Austria, Italy and Germany are the only states to have chaired the OSCE twice since the end of the Cold War. In times in which the OSCE has become more relevant, it is widely acknowledged that it has become increasingly difficult to motivate states and foreign ministries to assume the chairmanship and that the lack of clear mechanisms to designate its annual chairs are problematic. At the time of writing, there was still no designated chair for 2021 and next year's Troika is thus missing a member. Repeatedly, such situations of uncertainty trigger systemic considerations, including the possibility of a rotating chairmanship or the division of labor between the chair and the Secretariat, between the capitals and Vienna, but also about the underlying motivations for assuming or not assuming the OSCE chairmanship.

Arguments against assuming the chairmanship vary and include geographical distance, costs, limited size and associated capacity, or a lack of internal agreement within governments about assuming a post that may be perceived as offering little benefit. At the same time, the cost argument was cited as having only limited value, as a few million Euros may be all it takes. A sense of duty, given the OSCE's relevance since 2014, as well as a desire to show commitment to multilateralism or to showcase capacity with

an eye to a similar role in other institutions such as the UN or the EU can work in favor of chairing.

A chair's work can be facilitated by relying on existing structures like the Troika, institutions, and on "friends" at the OSCE, as well as by making best use of MCs that are targeted and not overburdened. It was highlighted that many smaller States did exceptional work as chairs, which is proof that financial resources are not key, but rather commitment and an effective use of partners.

Still, chairing such a consensus-based institution designed for bad rather than good weather, across and balancing its three dimensions, can be cumbersome and frustrating. Success is currently defined as merely preventing backsliding, but the chair's task is more crucial than ever. There needs to be clarity about the need to adequately prepare for and about the intentions behind a bid for chairmanship. At the same time, it was mentioned that agreeing to chair may be similar to entering marriage, without fully knowing what one is getting into. Insiders to the OSCE, who are aware of its constraints, its unique opportunities, and the crucial role it has played in avoiding further conflict since 2014, can speak for its importance, towards capitals, across ministries as well as towards society and media.

5 Multiple Organizations and Cooperative Security

As today's challenges cannot be met by any one institution alone, international organizations all have well-established practices of entering into partnerships with each other, and the OSCE is no exception. According to the view of some participants, the OSCE's partnership policy requires partnerships to be based on shared values. It was also suggested that the perspective should be turned around, looking at which organizations may consider partnership with the OSCE beneficial and where partnerships can foster effective multilateralism, while ensuring partnerships are relevant across all OSCE dimensions. It was stressed that partnerships should be measured by their purpose and benefit, not by their mere establishment. It was further argued that such effects, as well as the impact of the OSCE's work in many fields, may be hard to quantify and measure.

It was acknowledged that there can be a degree of competition between organizations and that overlap needs to be avoided. It was generally thought that the OSCE should focus on its core attributes of being inclusive and comprehensive across its three dimensions. There was widespread agreement that duplications should be specifically pointed out, if perceived, as the OSCE is determined

to avoid them. In 2014, the OSCE proved that it was unique in such a setting, acting as a neutral UN Chapter 8 organization in the crisis in and around Ukraine. The conflict in and around Ukraine reflects the need for coordination among international actors, demonstrating that there are different interpretations and ambitions regarding the engagements with the host country, civil society, and other non-state actors.

Financial resources were another element of the debate, with some emphasizing that the OSCE's work may not come as cheaply as is usually portrayed, while others emphasized the numerically low costs and the fact that the OSCE provides excellent value for little cost. Ultimately, there was no consensus on whether debating costs and cost-effectiveness is beneficial or not.

In the end, the OSCE balances different countries' priorities. Allocations to the organization are largely based on political, not financial considerations. As such, the OSCE was encouraged to stress its unique assets, as well as its added value and successes, rather than merely focusing on being good value for money. The quick and successful mobilization of the necessary funds for the SMM were cited as a case in point.

6 Conclusion: The OSCE in 2025

The last panel picked up the theme of the conference: where will and should the OSCE be in 2025, which will mark the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act? There will be no shortage of issues in 2025 given accelerated global trends: conflicts, wars in the OSCE's neighborhood, migration, terrorism, populism, climate change. For some of these issues, the OSCE may be highly relevant, yet it does not have the capacity to address all of them, let alone at the same time. Predictions about the state of affairs in 2025 are very difficult to make, given today's instability.

During the Helsinki Process, not unlike today, there were different strategies and perspectives about détente and different definitions of the international order and the rules of international relations among the parties involved. Landmark agreements were, nonetheless, achieved in times of high tension, as both sides recognized the urgency of the situation and were faced with their own domestic crises. Leaders were personally committed and willing to patiently pursue diplomatic channels and to compromise. However, the international order was more structured then, and the goals of the parties involved were clearer, as opposed to today's crises of domestic and international legitimacy. The significance and interpretation of some provisions, including its contradictions and ambiguities, may have a different meaning in today's circumstances.

As such, political leadership, innovation, strategic thinking, and the willingness to use the OSCE as a platform for dialogue and cooperation rather than confrontation will matter even more today and in the future. The qualities of the OSCE – its geographical scope and its decision-making processes and structures supporting ongoing dialogue – need to be utilized.

Some participants encouraged innovative ideas and political will for conflict prevention, risk reduction, and a slow, step-by-step process to build trust and meaningful engagement. Some suggested that the recommendations of the Report of the Panel of Eminent Persons on European Security should be taken more seriously, for example, on the need to engage in track-II processes. At the same time, the report's limits were stressed, as it inspires dialogue but does not suggest specific immediate action, nor represent a consensus among participating States. While there was almost universal agreement that there may not and should not be an alternative to the OSCE principles, their interpretation was named as a fundamental challenge, as well as the resolution of conflicts between principles.

Some participants emphasized the need to engage in the OSCE, to support it both politically and financially, as it cannot be taken for granted. If it is not employed to its best use, it may simply fade away, with no alternative in place. While there was a call for creativity on the part of diplomats, similar to the willingness to discuss paradigms during the Helsinki Process, other participants qualified such calls and emphasized the need for capitals to engage and to thoroughly prepare for windows of opportunity. The latter may indeed open, if only briefly, for example, on Ukraine.

The panel discussion concluded with a call both to recognize the urgency of the situation as well as to meaningfully engage with it. Leaders must agree on the need and possibility for substantive change. Engagement is required now (even if there is a need to agree to disagree about elements of the past) to build unity around the common purpose of preventing war.

Key Considerations

- Can actors find common ground by agreeing to work around disputes about the past, rather than trying to change each other's attitudes? Can we build on the consensus around the desire to avoid conflict and the necessity of continuing to talk to each other?
- Given the challenge of attracting new OSCE chairs, in what ways can the benefits and added value of the OSCE and of taking responsibility within it better be communicated to capitals as well as to media and society?
- Should participating States engage in risk reduction exercises, potentially in zones where clashes and incidents are most likely? If so, how should it be stressed that security in Europe is nonetheless indivisible?
- How can expectations match resources at the OSCE? What kinds of credible financial and human resources can empower the OSCE in general, but also the SMM in Ukraine, to fulfill their designated and extended roles?
- Should the OSCE – and if so, with which institutions – pursue cooperation and partnerships with other organizations? Such engagement would have to be based on participating States understanding the benefits of such cooperation across all three dimensions.
- How can the OSCE recognize both the challenges and opportunities of China's growing role and influence? Can it use such a process internally to establish more clarity on and firm belief in the OSCE's fundamental values?
- Can the recommendations of the Panel of Eminent Persons' report serve as a source of inspiration for meaningful engagement and slow attempts to build trust, even though it did not and could not outline immediate action?
- Can we draw lessons from the CSCE process, as 2025 marks 50 years since the Helsinki Final Act? Such lessons may include the need to establish a common understanding of urgency and crisis, as well as the need for political leadership and patience – recalling that even in times of tensions, landmark agreements were possible.
- Should the OSCE push for innovation, political leadership, and strategic thinking, both on the part of capitals and delegations?
- Can prepared plans of action help seize windows of opportunity, for example in Ukraine?
- Has the time come to consider a summit, which would give the necessary impetus for action and encourage a clarification of the OSCE's principles and values?

About the Co-hosts

Slovakia holds the OSCE Chairmanship in 2019. Learn more about Slovakia holding the Chair of the OSCE at <https://www.mzv.sk/web/pmvienna-en/home> and about the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic at <https://www.mzv.sk/web/en>

Albania will hold the OSCE Chairmanship in 2020. Learn more about the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania at <https://punetejashtme.gov.al>

Italy held the OSCE Chairmanship in 2018. Learn more about Italy holding the Chair of the OSCE at https://www.esteri.it/mae/en/politica_estera/osce/la-presidenza-italiana-dell-osce.html and about the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy at <http://www.esteri.it/mae/en>

Switzerland held the Chairmanship of the OSCE most recently in 2014. Learn more about the Switzerland holding the Chair of the OSCE at <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/en/home/news/dossiers/alle-dossiers/osce-chairmanship-2014.html> and about the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs of Switzerland at <https://www.fdfa.admin.ch/eda/en/home.html>

The Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF) is an international centre of excellence whose mission is to assist partner States, and international actors supporting these States, to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms. DCAF has a long-standing collaborative relationship with the OSCE. Learn more at <http://www.dcaf.ch/>

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