

# OSCE

## Focus 2018

# The OSCE at a Crossroads: Recognizing and Seizing Opportunities

## Reflections and Recommendations

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, and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF). The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions of the ministries of foreign affairs of Austria, Italy, Slovakia or Switzerland, nor those of CSS, DCAF or any of the OSCE Focus 2018 conference participants. While the report summarizes the main themes, conclusions and recommendations of the conference, it does not provide a full account of the very rich and productive discussions held during the event. Instead, the report aims to highlight the main points of convergence and divergence among participants and to stimulate further work on European security and the role of the OSCE.

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## The OSCE Focus 2018 at a Glance

Held on 12-13 October at Villa Moynier in Geneva, the OSCE Focus 2018 conference was dedicated to the theme 'The OSCE at a Crossroads: Recognizing and Seizing Opportunities'. Over 40 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 recommendations put forward during the conference. The workshop was organized by the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) with support from, and in close collaboration with, the ministries of foreign affairs of Austria, Italy, Slovakia, and Switzerland, along with the Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich.

### The Participants

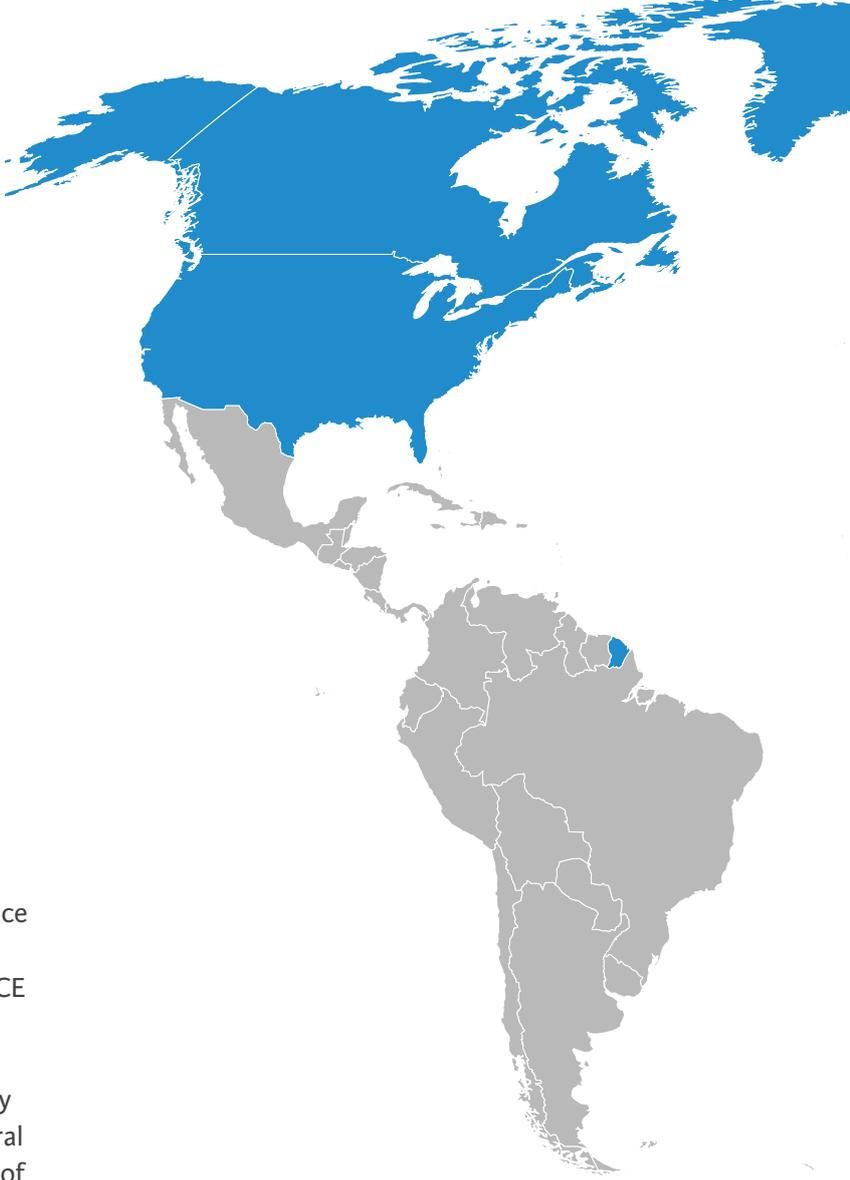
The participants of the OSCE Focus 2018 were representatives of the OSCE participating States, including Austria, Italy, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Sweden, Switzerland and Ukraine. In addition, senior officials of the OSCE executive structures attended the conference, including the Secretary General, the Director of the Conflict Prevention Centre and the 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: 'The OSCE at a Crossroads: Recognizing and Seizing Opportunities'. The programme included six topics each of which were introduced by the author of a paper and debated by two or three additional panellists. The six topics were: 'European Security: A Global Perspective'; 'The Spirit of Cooperation and the Structured Dialogue'; 'Reforming the OSCE: Between Continuity and Change'; 'Prospects for Mediterranean Security'; 'Strengthening the OSCE's Approach to Supporting SSG/R'; and 'Challenges to the Human Dimension'.

### 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.



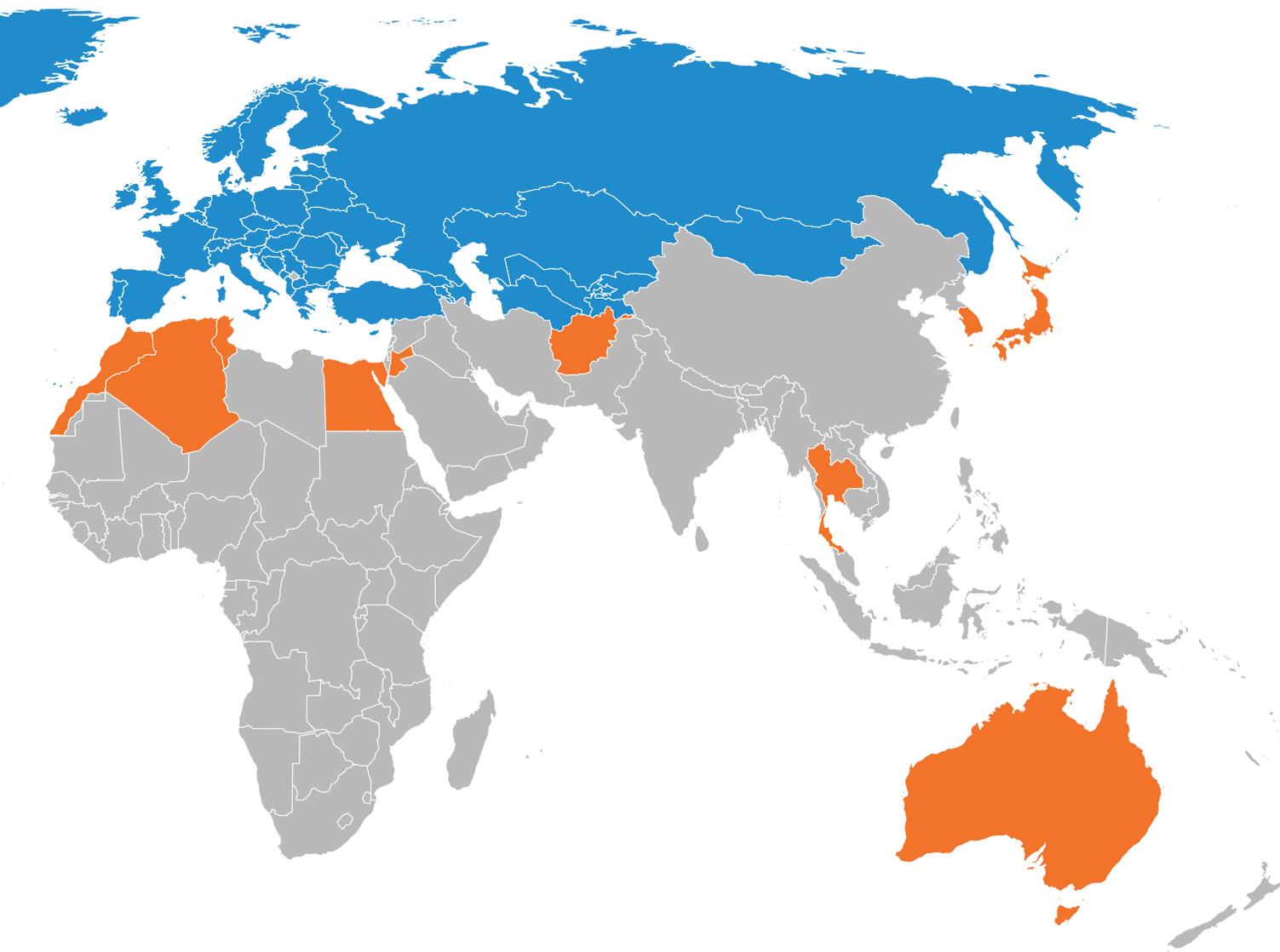
## Introduction

The 2018 edition of the annual OSCE Focus conference series took place at a time of uncertainty for the OSCE. As alluded to in the conference's title, the OSCE is (again) at a crossroads and faces huge challenges. The concepts of a liberal, norms-and-rules-based world order and cooperative security are increasingly questioned, along with the added value of multilateral diplomacy. These trends all go against the very core of the OSCE. Against this backdrop, it would be easy to become pessimistic or even cynical about the future of the OSCE. At the 2018 Focus Conference, however, a different perspective prevailed. While acknowledging the complicated challenges confronted by the OSCE, the participants decided to focus instead on 'recognizing and seizing opportunities', as the subtitle of the Focus Conference suggested.

OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger drew on the theme of 'opportunities' during his informal dinner speech, thus setting a positive tone for the conference. He gave Belarus as an example of a country that firmly believes in the OSCE and that has advanced Minsk as a new capital for dialogue and potentially a 'Helsinki 2.0' process. At a recent meeting at Political Director level in Rome, Greminger felt strong support for the OSCE Structured Dialogue. The positive developments of the Transnistrian settlement process are another hopeful sign in generally turbulent times

– following 25 years of little progress. The good news from Moldova may potentially serve as an inspiration for other protracted conflicts in the OSCE space.

Finally, Greminger emphasized positive trends in Central Asia and opportunities in the Mediterranean. He concluded by stressing that partnership with the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) could also benefit the OSCE and made a strong case for OSCE liaison offices in Brussels, New York, Geneva or Minsk.



*Unofficial Map of the OSCE region and partners for cooperation*

During focused discussions as part of the six panels, several innovative proposals were put forward. Rather than summarizing these discussions in full, this report will discuss in detail a selection of six key opportunities debated during the conference. The Milan OSCE Ministerial Council (MC), which will take place on 6-7 December 2018, will test whether the ‘spirit of Geneva’ can be translated into concrete consensus and action.

The ideas and suggestions developed during informal discussions at the OSCE Focus Conference will also hopefully inspire the upcoming Slovak and Albanian OSCE chairmanships in 2019 and 2020 (subject to MC decision) respectively. They may even encourage other OSCE participating States to step forward and seize these opportunities during a subsequent OSCE chairmanship.

## 1

# Working towards a Future Political Vision for the OSCE

A panel discussion on the concrete OSCE reform proposals advanced by OSCE Secretary General Thomas Greminger in February 2018 turned into “group therapy” for OSCE insiders who used the opportunity to lament the misuse of consensus within the organization. They also acknowledged, however, that the consensus rule was part of the OSCE’s DNA and that, ironically, any reform would have to be approved by consensus. In addition, they regretted that ‘spoiling’ within the OSCE was cheap since spoilers cannot be punished for blocking consensus in totally unrelated matters or even for blackmailing the OSCE.

Long-time OSCE insiders warned that today’s institutional crisis is real – a diminishing field presence; the controversy surrounding the Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM); the scale of financial contributions, etc. – and the need for reform more urgent than in earlier debates (e.g. Panel of Eminent Persons on Strengthening the Effectiveness of the OSCE in 2005, or the Helsinki+40 process from 2012-2015). They feel that the OSCE community

has lost the feeling of shared ownership and that national egoism tops collective security. Pessimistic and alarmist insiders consider that the OSCE does not need to be reformed, but rather kept alive to ensure its day-to-day business.

Participants suggested that political will was the most crucial factor needed to advance the OSCE’s standing and to make better use of its impressive existing tool box in the conflict cycle. The OSCE’s dual leadership with a continuity pillar (Secretary General) and a change pillar (annual chairmanship) should be combined more effectively. Secretary General Greminger agreed that the rules of the game within the OSCE could not be radically changed, but that the capabilities of the Secretariat to support field operations and the chairmanship could be strengthened. Participants also considered that there was no contradiction as far as the positions of two camps within the OSCE were concerned: one that does not wish to return to business as usual as long as the Ukraine Crisis remains unresolved, and Russia’s



OSCE Focus 2018 conference  
Photo: DCAF

violations of core OSCE principles and norms remain unpunished; and the other that supports a pragmatic approach focusing on niches of cooperation and problem-solving where interests overlap to incrementally rebuild trust. In fact, participants felt that both approaches were required.

For the future of the OSCE, a positive unifying agenda was needed to serve as a new vision similar to the vision of Helsinki 1975, Paris 1990, Istanbul 1999 or Astana 2010. Italy's chairmanship slogan of dialogue, ownership and responsibility could be used to launch a constructive debate about a positive future vision for the OSCE in 2020 or 2025 – 30 years of the Paris Charter or 50 years after the Helsinki Final Act. In other words, if the OSCE wants to become 'fit for purpose' (as in the reform slogan advanced by Thomas Greminger), there needs to be a clearer common picture of what the future purpose of the OSCE should be. Any future political vision needs to be supported by both the West (including the United States) and Russia.

It was acknowledged that one of the underrated strengths of the OSCE is that it is one of the few places where participating States come together, even if they do not agree with each other. At the OSCE, participants are forced to listen to the other side – which is an increasingly rare good in today's societies, and an advantage. By reporting back on the weekly disputes taking place in the Permanent Council in Vienna, capitals are also educated about divergent views and political realities.

## 2

## Changing the Narrative of the HDIM Controversy

There is a generally held view that the human dimension of the OSCE – the innovative ‘Third Basket’ of the Helsinki Process that links respect for individual human rights with international security and stability – has lost the collective support of OSCE participating States. Regional and global trends are worrying. Democracy, rule of law and human rights are eroding and frequently challenged in many OSCE participating States – both to the east and west of Vienna. The current wave of nationalist, populist and often xenophobic movements is harmful to the OSCE’s acquis. The organization’s carefully negotiated norms and values are neglected, challenged or openly violated. The space for civil society and international human rights bodies is shrinking in many OSCE participating States.

The prime event of the OSCE’s human dimension, the annual two-week Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) conference in Warsaw, was recently in the spotlight. In 2017, the Turkish delegation walked out in protest against the inclusion of a certain NGO with alleged ties to terrorists (in Ankara’s view). In

2018, Turkey did not attend HDIM at all. In a consensus-based organization, any participating State has the potential to sabotage unrelated OSCE decisions too, including at Ministerial Council level. Unrelated issues are linked with human rights and an ‘all or nothing attitude’ prevails – thus threatening the functioning of the OSCE proper (e.g. by a refusal to give consensus to the OSCE’s annual budget unless certain demands are fulfilled).

It was also emphasized at the Focus Conference that freedom of speech in the broad sense should not be an excuse for tolerating hate speech at OSCE events such as the HDIM, which clearly contradicts the spirit of Helsinki. According to several participants, the 2018 HDIM conference saw a worrying increase in unbearable hate speech, against religions (e.g. Islam) or ethnic groups – which made HDIM less relevant in the eyes of many OSCE participating States.

Discussing the future of HDIM and the OSCE’s human dimension, the panellists tried to move away from a sober and pessimistic mood. For example, there were



OSCE Focus 2018 conference  
Photo: DCAF

several suggestions on how HDIM could be reformed, drawing on ideas already discussed in 2012 during the Irish OSCE chairmanship. Participants made the following suggestions: moving the event from September to spring to allow more time between HDIM and the Ministerial Council and to avoid competing with the UN General Assembly in New York when attracting senior level officials; developing a fixed agenda (thus avoiding cumbersome negotiations on a specific agenda every year); shortening the two-week event to five days; asking participants to submit a synopsis of their speeches in the run-up of HDIM in order to check its relevance to the session and to restrict hate speech and so-called governmental non-governmental organizations (GONGO) groups at OSCE events; narrowing the focus of HDIM to the implementation of the OSCE's human dimension commitments; and re-emphasising OSCE's status as an organization of 57 states rather than a human rights organization.

Participants also suggested that the West should move away from an overly defensive attitude and become more proactive. Indeed, current negative trends have mobilized human rights supporters. An 'Informal Working Group of HDIM Friends' at the high level of Political Directors could be used to set thematic agendas, reform the HDIM event and provide voluntary funds. An Informal Working Group could also focus on one particular topic and thus focus on substance rather than procedure.

In order to address the broader human dimension blockage dimension – which is clear from the fact that no human dimension decision has been adopted since the 2014 OSCE Ministerial Council (MC) in Basel – participants argued that while negotiating the successfully adopted MC Decision on Antisemitism in 2014, a clear promise was given to also address Islamophobia and Christianity in later MC decisions, the so-called "Basel tasking". When the EU in 2015 changed its position, no consensus could be found at MC level on human dimension topics.



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

### 3 Managing Expectations for the Structured Dialogue

While the OSCE Structured Dialogue (SD) is praised among OSCE insiders and academic observers alike as a rare success story and the OSCE's 'flagship dialogue initiative', many conference participants gave a more cautious, but perhaps more realistic assessment. They felt that a frequent misperception could be avoided, namely that the SD could solve underlying political problems between Russia and the West, and that expectations should be managed to avoid disappointments. The aim of the SD should not be to revive conventional arms control and negotiate a CFE-like legally binding treaty, as this is unlikely to be achieved in the next decade. While the SD can achieve things, the aim of the SD should not be to revive conventional arms control.

In particular, the SD can achieve the following things:  
1) it can engage the military community and build confidence and trust through military-to-military

contacts; 2) it can prepare for better times and serve as a preparatory phase for future substantial talks and negotiations; 3) it can be used to explore measures to better manage or reduce military risks, e.g. mechanisms for close military encounters.

One speaker underlined the importance of the maritime dimension in future conventional arms control (CAC) agreements and military restraint measures in specified zones. Such restraint arrangements could be applied to Kaliningrad (by Russia) and the Baltic Sea (by NATO), with strict control of movements and implementation/verification. Participants also suggested further discussing confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs), such as prior notification (as encouraged in chapter X of the Vienna Document), including for naval activities in the Baltic Sea. Lessons may be learned from Black Sea naval agreements.



Other participants remained sceptical and stated that to restore trust, Russia needed to return to principles and norms and deeds in the real world rather than words uttered in the Hofburg. Before discussing future CAC, Moscow needs to implement existing measures and support a modernization of the Vienna Document. Several participants were also strictly against a regionalization of security by devising particular arms control regimes for specific regions (such as the Baltic Sea or the Black Sea).

Commenting on academic ideas for a regional CAC arrangement in the Baltic Sea, participants felt there was no chance of implementing them in the current political reality. Russia would first need to contribute positively to a political solution to the Ukraine Crisis (e.g. militarily disengage from the Donbass and implement the Minsk Agreement) before the West would be ready to seriously discuss any Russian CAC proposal.

In this view, Moscow holds the key and needs to take the first step towards breaking the current link between the crisis in and around Ukraine.

In the discussion, participants agreed that the agenda of the SD should not be overloaded, that risk reduction measures currently have the best chance of being implemented, that Vienna Document loopholes need to be addressed to build trust, and that CAC preparatory talks in the SD should focus on restraint measures in sensitive areas. It was also suggested that one major lesson from the 1980s and the end of the Cold War was that, to overcome mistrust, unilateral disarmament steps by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev were instrumental to incite tit-for-tat responses of the other side – a rather uncomfortable truth for a multilateral diplomacy organization such as the OSCE and given the lack of visionary political leadership in both Washington and Moscow at present.



OSCE Focus 2018 conference  
Photo: DCAF

# 4

## Increasing Contacts with China

An introductory panel set the scene by focusing on global perspectives and discussing the effects of the eroding liberal world order for European security. The consideration of a Chinese perspective was particularly fascinating, as the OSCE does not figure prominently in Chinese thinking, both at the political or academic level. The OSCE is barely known in China, where attention is focused more on the EU and NATO.

As China is mostly interested in trade and technology, the EU is at the centre of Beijing’s interest. Despite current disputes, it largely considers Europe to be stable and secure. From a Western perspective, however, China appears as an investor in the OSCE space and as a “norm challenger”, as Chinese norms and values diverge from the OSCE’s acquis. Finally, China is also a distractor, as the rise of China as a geopolitical actor takes US attention away from Europe, with US administrations increasingly focused on Asia rather than Europe.

A speaker emphasized that the current trade war with the Trump administration also offers opportunities for cooperation with Europe and to revitalize the EU-China Strategic Partnership. The discussions made it clear that the OSCE might benefit from trying to reach out to China again, even if there is not much interest on the Chinese side.

A dialogue with China would be preferable to the current dialogue about China. China probably could not become a partner of the OSCE, as Beijing has no incentive to share OSCE norms and commitments. A creative alternative might be to invite China to participate at OSCE events as an observer. As China will have an increasing impact in the OSCE region, it seems clear that the OSCE has to think about how to engage China in a cooperative way on issues of common concern.

## 5

## Developing a Strategic Approach to SSG/R

The OSCE has a proven record of accomplishment both at the normative and the operational level on supporting security sector governance and reform (SSG/R) in participating States. SSG/R is a core activity for the OSCE, even if it is often labelled differently. While SSG/R made its definitive entrance into the OSCE with the Swiss OSCE Chairmanship in 2014 and much progress has been made since, the lack of a strategic approach remains the organization's biggest challenge, limiting the effectiveness of its assistance in both scope and impact. Against this backdrop, there are increasing calls from within the organization and its participating States to develop a common understanding of SSG/R in the context of the OSCE and to seek agreement on the key principles and elements of an OSCE approach to SSG/R. Five factors could make 2019 the 'year of SSG/R' and enable the development of a strategic approach.

First, the Slovak 2019 OSCE Chairmanship has included SSG/R among its work priorities. Second, in March 2019, the first-ever Secretary General's report on the topic will be put forward. Third, 27 of the 57 OSCE participating States are members of a group of friends of SSG/R (chaired by Slovakia since 2014), thus generating momentum. Fourth, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly recently adopted a resolution on SSG/R, requesting a MC decision on SSG/R. Fifth,

2019 will be the 25th anniversary of the landmark OSCE Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security (1994), sections VII and VIII of which constitute the most elaborate normative foundations for SSG/R.

However, discussions in Geneva also focused on political risks – recalling earlier attempts, for example in 2007, to develop a strategic approach to SSG/R. Participants discussed whether the OSCE's current term of choice – SSG/R – should be changed to SSG only, thereby further emphasizing the good governance dimension and addressing concerns that the term 'reform' has negative connotations in OSCE circles. Participants also stressed that national ownership of SSG/R processes is crucial and that external actors should limit themselves to supporting nationally led processes and refrain from imposing their own models.

It was underlined that SSG/R is relevant for different contexts as developed countries also have a need for improving SSG/R, not only countries in transition. During the course of next year, the organization could focus on sharing best practices, showcasing success stories and generally raising awareness, thus highlighting the merits of SSG/R to OSCE participating States beyond the 27 friends of SSG/R.

## 6

## Establishing an OSCE Field Presence in Italy

The Mare Nostrum was one of the priorities of the Italian chairmanship in 2018; however, the OSCE Mediterranean Partnership has not been able to increase ownership on both shores of the Mediterranean, even though the Mediterranean Conferences in 2016, 2017 and 2018 were quasi-Ministerial conferences and became a powerful vehicle in themselves (compared with the still weaker Asian Partnership). A lack of follow-up and strategic multi-year perspectives reduced the appeal of a partnership for both OSCE participating States and Mediterranean partners. The partnership would benefit from a Special Representative and/or an OSCE Centre of Excellence, but the OSCE's efforts in the region usually receive very limited funding.

The US and Russia have no real interest in strengthening the OSCE's ties with the region, and less than a third of OSCE participating States are actively engaged in the organization's respective activities. During the Italian chairmanship, with increased visibility for the region, most Italian initiatives – such as a mainstreaming migration management in the OSCE

Secretariat through an OSCE Migration Coordinator or a project to fight human trafficking – were not multi-lateralized, i.e. financially supported by other OSCE participating States.

This lack of interest on both sides of the Mediterranean in OSCE activities is surprising, given that current security challenges, including migration, PVE and foreign fighters, have a strong Mediterranean link. The OSCE would have a lot to offer to Mediterranean security, including experience in democratization processes (in Eastern Europe), election observation, youth radicalization (in the Balkans) and key norm-setting documents such as the OSCE Code of Conduct.

Italy would be in favour of having an OSCE field presence focused on Mediterranean security in Italy, e.g. in Trieste. A topical field presence in a Western country, dealing with security challenges from the South, would also be helpful to remove the impression that countries with OSCE field missions are stigmatized.

# Key Recommendations: Seizing six opportunities

- **Work towards a future political vision for the OSCE that is supported by both Russia and the West, including the United States. Better promote the OSCE's unique strength that OSCE participating States are forced to listen to the other side.**
- **Reform the mechanism of the Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM) by moving the event to spring, introduce a fixed agenda, and shorten it to five days. Participants should submit a synopsis of their speeches. HDIM should more narrowly focus on the implementation of OSCE commitments. Set up an Informal Working Group of "HDIM Friends" at Political Directors level.**
- **Do not overload the agenda of the informal Structured Dialogue, but focus on risk reduction measures, closing loopholes of the Vienna Document, and restraint measures in sensitive areas.**
- **Reach out again to China and invite Beijing to participate at OSCE events as an observer. It is better to have a dialogue with China than a dialogue about China.**
- **Make 2019 the 'The Year of Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R)' under the Slovak Chair and take the opportunity to further the development of a strategic approach for the OSCE's manifold activities in this field.**
- **Keep alive the discussion about an OSCE Special Representative for Mediterranean Security and an OSCE Centre of Excellence for Mediterranean Security to be possibly established in Italy.**

## About the Co-hosts

Austria held the Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2017. Learn more about Austria holding the Chair of the OSCE at <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/security-policy/the-austrian-chairmanship-in-2017/> and about the Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs at <https://www.bmeia.gv.at/en/>

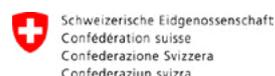
Italy holds the OSCE Chairmanship in 2018. Learn more about Italy holding the Chair of the OSCE at [http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala\\_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2016/07/osce-presidenza-2018-all-italia.html](http://www.esteri.it/mae/en/sala_stampa/archivionotizie/comunicati/2016/07/osce-presidenza-2018-all-italia.html) and about the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy at <http://www.esteri.it/mae/en>

Slovakia will hold the OSCE Chairmanship in 2019. Learn more about Slovakia holding the Chair of the OSCE at [https://www.mzv.sk/web/pmvienna-en/detail/-/asset\\_publisher/XptbLMYwZmJ6/content/l-parizek-vo-viedni-predstavil-ramcove-priority-nadchadzajuceho-predsednictva-sr-v-obse/10182?p\\_p\\_auth=YBAIjKln&\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_XptbLMYwZmJ6\\_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fpmvienna-en](https://www.mzv.sk/web/pmvienna-en/detail/-/asset_publisher/XptbLMYwZmJ6/content/l-parizek-vo-viedni-predstavil-ramcove-priority-nadchadzajuceho-predsednictva-sr-v-obse/10182?p_p_auth=YBAIjKln&_101_INSTANCE_XptbLMYwZmJ6_redirect=%2Fweb%2Fpmvienna-en) and about the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic at <https://www.mzv.sk/web/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 the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (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/>

The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at ETH Zurich is a centre of competence on Swiss and international security policy, offering security expertise in research, teaching and consultancy. Founded in 1986, it combines research and policy consultancy and thus functions as a bridge between academia and practice. Learn more at <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/>



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