

The OSCE: Choking Canary or Rising Phoenix?®

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Do we still need the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)? Listening to some people, including at a high level in Russia, you could come to the conclusion that the OSCE is no longer relevant. It is criticized for double standards, focusing too much on human rights, and being a biased election monitor.

These are criticisms that need to be addressed. If there are differences of opinion, they can be discussed and resolved. That is what the OSCE is for.

We have a deeper problem if all 55 OSCE States no longer share the same standards.

I have heard criticisms of the OSCE as being too intrusive in the internal affairs of some of its members. And yet, in Moscow in 1991 all OSCE states agreed – by consensus – that commitments undertaken in the human dimension are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned.

That is the legitimate basis through which Russia, and others, can express concern about Russian-speaking minorities in other participating States. It is also how OSCE States can hold Uzbekistan to account for the recent events in Andijan, or complain about capital punishment or prisoner detention in the United States.

If the OSCE can be improved, it should be. But not at the expense of its common values and commitments. They are the bedrock of the OSCE. If that cracks, Europe is in trouble.

Europe and its peoples need the oxygen of democracy in order to breathe and to grow. If that air does not blow freely, democracy and even good-neighborly relations will be stifled.

In that respect, the OSCE is like a canary in a coal mine. And if it looks like the canary is currently choking, we should all be alarmed.

However, I am more optimistic. Having heard the calls for reform, OSCE States have engaged in a process to make the Organization stronger and more efficient.

Two weeks ago, a Panel of Eminent Persons – including the experts from the Russian Federation – submitted a report with recommendations for reforming the OSCE. They acknowledge that the Organization's agenda and its operational tools need further improvement, and they make a number of suggestions about how this can be done. There seems to be broad agreement on the fact that the OSCE needs an improved "modus operandi".

This requires the active engagement of all its States. All members must feel a sense of ownership in the Organization. The expression "even-handed" was used several times, suggesting the need for improvements in transparency and a better balancing of the OSCE's different dimensions (politico-military, economic and environmental, and human) in order to better serve the interests of all members.

As the title of the report of the Panel of Eminent Persons says, “Common Purpose” is essential to create a more effective OSCE. Common action based on common standards can help address common threats.

The key now is to put these good intentions into practice. There will be high level consultations leading up to a meeting of OSCE foreign ministers in Ljubljana in December.

The good news is, that for better or for worse, the OSCE has everyone’s attention. The Russian Federation, United States, European Union and others may have differing views on the OSCE’s priorities, but there seems to be little doubt on the need for making the OSCE as effective as possible – not as an end in itself, but as a way of improving European security.

For example, while the OSCE is well known for its work on elections, national minorities and freedom of the media, it has developed expertise in areas like policing, counter terrorism and anti-trafficking.

OSCE field operations in sixteen countries are helping States at a very practical level to deal with a range of issues from legal reform to crisis management.

The OSCE, like its predecessor the CSCE, is a forum for dialogue. It is the most inclusive consultative and decision-making forum for discussing and dealing with issues in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space.

In short, it is an Organization that deserves support from Russia and all other OSCE states.

Almost exactly thirty years ago, on 1 August 1975, 35 heads of state and government met in Helsinki to sign the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. That conference, the largest of its kind since the end of the Second World War, was convened (at the initiative of the Soviet Union) to create a collective security system in Europe.

Fortunately, the Europe of the 1970s and 1980s is no more, thanks in part to the CSCE and the “Helsinki process” of détente.

But Europe is not yet whole and free, nor can its people feel completely safe from threats to their security.

We therefore need to work together to achieve security through co-operation. With sufficient reforms, the OSCE – so recently disparaged by some critics – can rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

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