OSCE Today

The OSCE has been experiencing a “mid-life crisis” in recent years that has raised some fundamental questions about itself, requiring a new set of adaptations if the organization is to continue to play a leading role in regional security and cooperation. This reflects a declining consensus about the normative foundations of the OSCE, especially of the human dimension documents adopted in the years immediately following the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe; several renewed crises in the realm of security, especially between Russia and NATO countries; and the stalemate in the arms control regime and other political foundations of cooperation that had created a favorable context for the OSCE to develop in the 1990s.

Basic priorities
The basic priorities of the OSCE at present are:

- **Democracy**: to consolidate the participating states’ common values and help in building fully democratic civil societies based on the rule of law and principles of “good governance”
- **Peace**: to prevent local conflicts, restore stability, seek to resolve “frozen conflicts,” and bring peace to war-torn areas
- **Security**: to overcome real and perceived security deficits, assist participating states in capacity-building, and seek to better address existing and future political, economic, and social divisions by promoting a cooperative system of security

Continuing activities
Despite stalemate on some of the larger political issues, the OSCE continues with “business as usual” on a large number of activities that seldom grab headlines, but which contribute to improved security throughout the region. These activities help in the following ways:

- Sixteen field missions monitor ongoing events and assist in a wide range of conflict management tasks on the ground.
- The Action Against Terrorism Unit assists participating states in improving their capacity to respond to the threat of terrorism.
- The Strategic Special Police Matters Unit supports training of police forces in improved police work within a democratic context that respects human rights.
- The Special Representative and Coordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings assists states in preventing trafficking in human beings, especially women and children, across state borders to serve as sex slaves, forced labor, or in other servile roles.
- The Forum for Security Cooperation assists states in monitoring, reducing the flow of small arms and light weapons across state borders, and in decommissioning arms within their own territories.
OSCE institutional challenges
In recent years, the OSCE has lost momentum built up after the end of the Cold War, causing it to reassess its role in regional security. There are several major causes of this crisis:

- Russia has grown suspicious of the OSCE, which it sees as focusing too much on intervention in states “east of Vienna” while ignoring problems in states “west of Vienna;” it also asserts that focus has become “unbalanced” in favor of human dimension and democratization activities to the neglect of security, economic, and environmental functions contained in the first two baskets of the Helsinki Final Act. The United States has shifted much of its foreign policy attention to Southwest Asia and the Middle East and has reduced its presence in the Balkans and other areas of concern to the OSCE, leading to a lowering of U.S. foreign policy attention in this region.
- The European Union has enlarged and now includes over half the OSCE participating states and has developed independent security institutions that potentially compete with those of the OSCE.

Consequences
The challenges affecting the OSCE has had several significant consequences for its operations:

- Consensus has been difficult to achieve, and ministerial meetings from 2002 to 2009 failed to adopt a consensus communiqué.
- There has also been conflict over the budget, and it has been common for budgets to be adopted well into the fiscal year.
- Key OSCE missions have been closed (in locations such as Chechnya, Georgia and Belarus); and mandates for other missions have been watered down.
- ODIHR (Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) has been placed under great pressure to make its election monitoring more “objective,” to expand its activities “west of Vienna,” and to avoid issuing reports that are likely to influence the outcome of domestic electoral processes in countries where it monitors.
- ODIHR cancelled its observation of the 2007 Duma and 2008 presidential elections in Russia rather than accept what it termed unprecedented restrictions on its mission, including limits on the number of observers it could deploy and the duration of their stay in Russia. In 2011 and 2012, however, agreement was reached for ODIHR to observe the State Duma and presidential elections.

Impact of the 2008 Russian-Georgian War
Prior to 2008, violent conflict had largely disappeared in the OSCE region following the end of the war in Kosovo in 1999. Although outbreaks of violence occurred in Macedonia in 2001, Kosovo in 2004, and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2005, the prevention of violent conflict no longer occupied the central role in the minds of political leaders as it did in the previous decade. Although the "frozen conflicts" in the Transdniestria region of Moldova, the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia, and the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan remained, they had neither reverted to large-scale violence nor appeared to be "ripe" for resolution. Much of this changed with the war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008, whose causes included the long-stalemated disputes over the status of the secessionist regions of Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The war challenged the basic normative principles underlying the organization and found the OSCE unable to play an effective role in ending the conflict or in addressing the issues resulting from it. By the end of the year, the OSCE Mission to Georgia had been closed, as a result
of Russian refusal to renew its mandate.

OSCE Chairman Alexander Stubb (left) and Ambassador Terhi Hakala (2 right). Head of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, meet with refugees in Gori, 21 August 2008 (OSCE/David Khizanishvili)

New Chairmanships, new dialogues on security

Corfu Process
The Corfu Process, launched by Greece during its 2009 Chairmanship, sought to establish a revitalized and wide-ranging dialogue among participating states on European security. The Corfu Process was a response to several developments: Russian President Medvedev's proposal in June 2008 for a renewed European security dialogue leading to a legally-binding treaty (rather than the network of politically-binding commitments created by CSCE/OSCE); the war in Georgia in August 2008, and French President Sarkozy's call later in the year for a summit to discuss Medvedev's proposal and EU ideas on a new European security architecture.

The V to V Dialogues
The V to V Dialogues (Vancouver to Vladivostok via Vienna and Vilnius) during the 2011 Lithuanian Chairmanship consisted of informal dialogues and workshops on conflict management to generate operational and actionable deliverables for the concluding Vilnius Ministerial Council and beyond.

Participants of the "V to V Dialogue" expert meeting on strengthening the mediation-support capacity of the OSCE, speaking during a break, Vienna, 12 July 2011. (Lithuanian MFA/Paulius Kalmantas)
Helsinki +40 Process
The Helsinki +40 Process was agreed on at the 2012 Dublin Ministerial Council to provide a roadmap to revitalize the OSCE in the period leading up to the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act in 2015.

Security Days Initiative
The OSCE Security Days initiative was launched in 2012 to provide an open forum bringing together diplomats, academics, experts, journalists and the general public to discuss the role of OSCE in current security challenges. This meeting addressed the role of civil society in shaping a security community. Recent workshops addressed the role of OSCE in reconciliation after conflicts, addressing climate change and using local approaches to global challenges. A May 2017 event addressed countering fragmentation and polarization in Europe.

2018 Annual Security Review Conference
This June 26-28 event brought together in an inclusive forum diplomats, officials, experts and academics to discuss dialogue, ownership, and responsibility to foster security in the OSCE area, including lessons learned and the way ahead in addressing the conflict cycle, challenges and opportunities arising from migration and current and future trends regarding transnational threats. The event included special sessions on developments in Ukraine and the Structured Dialogue process.

OSCE Chairperson-in-Office and Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis at the press conference after the informal meeting of OSCE foreign ministers, Corfu, 28 June 2009. (OSCE/George Kontarinis)