



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The OSCE cannot survive if Russia remains a member



It is highly likely that the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) will not celebrate its jubilee, 50 years after the adoption of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. Even if it exists until then, it will celebrate its "birthday" as a dysfunctional and outdated organisation whose purpose is questionable. The OSCE has had enormous problems in its functioning for years. It has had problems reaching important decisions that justify its existence. Since the Russian aggression against Ukraine, its existence, or at least its functioning, has drawn particular attention.

This year's North Macedonia's OSCE Chairmanship will have to ensure the functionality of the organisation as one of its priorities. When that is one of the most important topics in any organisation, then the question really arises: does your organisation really deserve a chance to survive? Russia has been at the centre of the OSCE's dysfunction for many years. Acting on the principle that all important decisions made by the organisation are reached by consensus, Russia has often used its veto on decisions that concerned those countries that Russia considers to be within its sphere of interest. Moscow's policy often led to the fact that the OSCE could neither harmonise its policy, nor even issue joint statements from important meetings.

The OSCE is one of many international forums whose foundations were destroyed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Russia was expelled from some organisations last year, for example from the Council of Europe and the UN Human Rights Council. In this respect, the OSCE is an organisation where there should be no place for Russia, because the essential objective of this organisation is to establish and maintain a common political and security structure in Europe, as a multilateral mechanism that has the ability to help in the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Votes for and against Russian membership

OSCE members are divided over Russia's

continued membership. Last year, first Poland, and then the UK, did not grant visas to the members of the Russian delegation who were preparing to travel to the Organisation's ministerial session in Lodz, or to the meeting of its Parliamentary Assembly in Birmingham. OSCE Secretary General Helga Schmid opposes Russia's exclusion. "It makes sense to keep Russia in the organisation to maintain diplomatic channels. One day, we will need conversation means again. And the OSCE is the only security organisation in which everyone important to the European security architecture sits at one table", Schmid told TV Welt. Russia remaining a member of OSCE is also important from the point of view of the International Crisis Group, which in its November report, pointed out that "having Russia among the participating states is still key to the OSCE's usefulness as a body, including for Western countries. In places where Russia remains influential, the OSCE offers a platform for coming up with security arrangements that enjoy broad acceptance."

Destabilisation factor

However, a glance at the map of the current main OSCE mediation activities and its largest missions, makes it clear that these are countries where Russia has been responsible for instability and conflict. Not counting six Balkan countries, as a post-conflict area, the OSCE has its main missions in the South Caucasus, where it helps resolve the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in Georgia, invaded by Russia in 2008, and in Moldova, which is still at risk of Russian military intervention. The OSCE experienced the peak of Russia's destructive agenda with its annexation of Crimea in 2014, and particularly the military invasion of Ukraine almost a year ago.

The OSCE then evacuated the members of its massive mission, who, amongst other things, monitored the implementation of the Minsk agreement regarding the stabilisation of conditions in east Ukraine, in the zones that were later annexed by Russia. Russian exclusion from the OSCE has so far been

explicitly requested only by Ukraine, whose head of diplomacy, Dmytro Kuleba, previously said that Russian membership in the Organisation is "a threat to security and cooperation in Europe". Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki spoke somewhat less explicitly, but along similar lines, when last March, one of his requests in his plan for Ukraine was the exclusion of Russia from "all international organisations".

Russia has an interest in remaining in the OSCE

Because of Russia's membership, the OSCE is struggling to make any effective decisions, so it recently resorted to the "consensus minus one" principle. That was the only way to pass the initiative of 45 member states to form an expert fact-finding group to collect information about violations of human rights and international humanitarian law committed during the war in Ukraine. The last time, the OSCE resorted to this way of decision-making was in the early 1990s, when it wanted to bypass the veto of the then FR Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro), due to its role in the civil war in the Balkans. As for Russia, there are currently no signs that it will abandon OSCE membership on its own. But that is not impossible, since its Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced last March that Russia "is not yet considering withdrawing from the OSCE, or suspending membership, but its patience is not unlimited". On the other hand, Russia has an interest in remaining a member of the OSCE, not in order to play a constructive role, but a destructive one, to hinder important multilateral decisions that would harm it in connection with its aggression against Ukraine.

Is it too late to reform the Organisation?

The OSCE has little reason to keep Russia as a member. Russia's role in this forum has not been constructive for a long time.

Furthermore, Ukraine is only the latest in a series of countries where Russia has severely violated the OSCE's fundamental document, the Helsinki Final Act, which enshrines the principles of inviolability of international borders and a peaceful way to resolve all conflicts. At the same time, Russia openly considers the vast majority of the 57 members of this organisation to be enemies, and there can be no rational expectation that with such an attitude, it will ever be able to have a partner relationship with them. A prerequisite for any future talks on peace in Ukraine, but also on other points where the OSCE can play a role, is a minimum of trust between the parties involved.

That trust, however, was completely destroyed by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, both on Russia's side and on the side of the rest of the OSCE members. The OSCE, therefore, has very little chance of undergoing reform and transformation into a forum that could be effective and carry out the mission for which it was created during the Cold War. The alternative is to shut it down and reestablish it on completely new organisational bases, where Russia, as a proven traditional source of aggressive conflicts on European soil, would certainly be excluded. Clearly, if there is time, it is not too late for any plans to reorganise the OSCE. When this year's North Macedonian presidency ends, Finland will take over in 2025, but there is no president for next year, 2024, because Russia blocked Estonia's candidacy for the presidency of the Organisation.