



January 26, 2026

Marking 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act

Modest Expectations, No Breakthroughs, Uncertain Future

By Douglas Wake

Abstract

This post highlights efforts to use major anniversaries of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to reflect upon and improve work of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). In 2025, “Helsinki+50” commemorations emphasised the 10 Helsinki Principles as well as wide-ranging political commitments and meaningful practical activities to promote comprehensive security, reflecting the many OSCE strengths as well as significant challenges ahead. While OSCE is likely to overcome short-term operational difficulties, its longer-term prospects hinge on the uncertain positions of key players, how the war in Ukraine will end, and how European security architecture will evolve. Experience shows the value of this platform for dialogue and collective action; states would thus be well-advised to maintain the OSCE machinery, not least to deal with opportunities that may present themselves in future.



Citation: Wake, OSCE 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act, NSM BLOG January 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

States participating in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) have the good habit of marking decades since their leaders signed the [Helsinki Final Act](#) (HFA) on 1 August 1975, agreeing to fundamental security principles and launching a process that became the OSCE.

In 1995, just before the HFA's 20th birthday, states [transformed the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe \(CSCE\) into the OSCE](#). Around the 30th anniversary of the HFA in 2005, OSCE leaders managed to agree on some modest steps to “[strengthen](#)” the Organization, particularly for election observation and internal management.

Modest Expectations

Some thought it timely to consider more far-reaching steps to “improve” the OSCE before the 40th anniversary of the HFA was commemorated in 2015. But the various initiatives aimed to prepare for “Helsinki+40” - including [work by an “eminent persons” panel](#) - were essentially shelved when attention shifted to Ukraine in late 2013. They were completely de-railed following Russia's annexation of Crimea and incursion into Donbas in 2014, after which the OSCE managed to deploy a large Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (SMMU) in a valiant but ultimately unsuccessful effort to contain the conflict.

Thus, no one had high expectations for the HFA's 50th birthday. The anniversary of a pact intended to foster peace, prosperity and human dignity was destined to be overshadowed by war, democratic backsliding, and deadlock on important institutional issues like the OSCE's budget and leadership. Ambitious plans for OSCE revival or reform for “Helsinki+50” were haunted by bad memories of similar efforts a decade earlier.

Serious Reflection

Despite this unfavorable climate, many scholars and diplomats used the HFA's approaching 50th anniversary to assess what the “Helsinki process” had achieved and to offer recommendations for the future. Many highlighted the OSCE's extraordinary strengths as the world's “largest regional security organization”:

- Agreement on shared principles and commitments encompassing a broad “comprehensive” concept of security;
- Openness to, and engagement from, civil society;
- A unique platform for dialogue and collective action among 57 “participating States,” with annual high-level and weekly Ambassadorial gatherings;
- Operational outreach: activities on the ground managed by complex yet cost-effective structures addressing the “conflict cycle” and other political-military challenges as well



Citation: Wake, OSCE 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act, NSM BLOG January 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

- as the economic and human dimensions of security (e.g., through robust election observation);
- Flexibility in adapting to new challenges.

But realism demanded attention to fundamental problems:

- Difficulty of consensus decision-making;
- Abuse by “spoilers,” budget fights and challenging leadership gaps;
- Fundamental divisions between Russia/Belarus and most other states on many core issues;
- Blatant violations of clear commitments (including but not limited to Russian aggression), the creeping erosion of fundamental principles, and inability to resolve long-standing “frozen” conflicts (e.g. in Moldova and the South Caucasus);
- Declining attention from political leaders, especially in comparison to the EU, NATO and the Council of Europe.

Sincere Efforts

Expert recommendations varied widely, including suggestions to focus solely on hard security, to narrow the range of programmatic activities, and to modify consensus decision-making. No one expected miracles, given that any changes would themselves require consensus among deeply divided states and that the OSCE – like all international organizations – reflects the states that authorize its mandates. Finland nevertheless volunteered to chair the OSCE in the 50th anniversary year and its then-President [wrote hopefully in 2021](#) about a possible Helsinki summit in 2025.

Cold Reality

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine made a difficult situation almost impossible. The SMMU was forced to leave Ukraine, its mandate ended as [three Ukrainian staff remained in Russian custody](#). Dialogue in Vienna became more heated and less productive than ever. Russia stopped inviting OSCE to observe its elections. The negative list goes on.

To be sure, most OSCE states continued to support the Organization and key activities continued, sometimes addressing contentious issues even in the absence of consensus. Bold initiatives included so-called “[Moscow Mechanism](#)” investigations of Russian crimes and a new [Support Programme for Ukraine](#) launched with voluntary funding.

The upcoming anniversary was downplayed by Finland, which focused more on joining NATO and supporting Ukraine. Talk of a summit was dropped. Finland planned a commemorative



Citation: Wake, OSCE 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act, NSM BLOG January 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

event that did not require consensus, featuring leaders like Zelensky and Tsikhanouskaya rather than Putin or Lukashenka.

Noteworthy Commemorations

Finland organised such an event on 31 July 2025, providing space for “experts” and civil society to interact with diplomats who met to discuss (but hardly agree upon) steps to make the OSCE more effective. (One concrete outcome was the launch of a “Helsinki+50 Fund” as a flexible vehicle for states to finance OSCE activities voluntarily.) Other commemorations included a [Helsinki gathering featuring historians](#) and a few surviving participants in the 1975 Helsinki conference. Civil society groups constituting the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) engaged in a “Helsinki+50 Reflection Process” to recommend improvements in a “[Manifesto](#)” and other documents. Work is continued by the European Network on pro-democracy engagement, the Team Europe Democracy Initiative, by seminars and workshops around the matter.

A particularly recommended by-product of the anniversary was the release of a witty, insightful documentary film, “The Helsinki Effect”, in which Finnish director Arthur Franck used archival records to re-create key moments in the negotiation of the HFA.

Finally, in December 2025, Finland organized the Ministerial Conference in Vienna and supported a CSP parallel conference. The CSP’s [Vienna Declaration and related texts](#) highlighted its Helsinki+50 suggestions and flagged urgent crises, focusing on Russian aggression but also citing other flashpoints – notably, including the deteriorating level of US respect for OSCE human rights and democracy commitments (see also Ursula Werther-Pietsch, *Der neue Feind des Multilateralismus*, here on the NSM Blog, or her latest contribution “*Von Caracas nach München, das europäische Karussell*”, published by the IIP).

The Ministerial Conference ultimately ended up rather [modestly](#), leaving key issues unresolved. While EU and other states generally praised the OSCE, the US sent a lower-level representative who delivered critical and even threatening [remarks](#). The mid-level Russian representative [complained](#) predictably of a pro-Ukrainian bias in the OSCE.

Looking Ahead

What awaits the OSCE as the Helsinki process enters its second half century and Switzerland succeeds Finland as Chair for 2026?

- *The OSCE faces serious operational challenges, including the need to adopt a budget (which has not happened since 2021) and choose an OSCE Chair for 2027 (which should have happened already).*
- *More fundamental questions revolve around the support that OSCE can expect from key states – notably, not only Russia but also the US and Ukraine (and even some EU states).*



Citation: Wake, OSCE 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act, NSM BLOG January 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

- *Larger and more existential issues relate to the future of European security, and a possible OSCE place in its architecture, once peace comes through in Ukraine.*

Prospects for addressing operational issues are not bad. Swiss diplomats should be able to avert a financial collapse, with or without an approved budget, and consensus should be possible on a Chair for 2027. OSCE leaders will undoubtedly oversee painful downsizing, mirroring what other multilaterals face in 2026. But key activities such as conflict prevention and countering trafficking in persons - as well as election observation and other human dimension work - will likely survive along with field operations in the Balkans, Central Asia, Moldova and Ukraine.

How the US will approach the OSCE in the future is highly uncertain, especially with questions looming about observation of US mid-term elections. There is a long tradition of US support for the OSCE, including in the US Congress, where even Marco Rubio was once an OSCE advocate, so it seems unlikely that the US will abandon the OSCE. And the OSCE was not among the list of international organizations that the Trump Administration announced it was leaving on 7 January 2026. But with new surprises coming out of Washington every day, who knows?

Russia's position is also uncertain – Putin could decide at any moment to walk away from a body where most states verbally batter Russia on a regular basis. Yet, is he not more likely to maintain Russia's longstanding position that it is best to be engaged in the OSCE as the only consensus-based European security body where Russia has an equal voice to the US and the ability to stop things it does not like?

To what extent the EU and Ukraine continue to see the OSCE as a viable actor on security issues is also not clear, but continued support seems likely. This is particularly the case for Austria, which has consistently played an important role in the Helsinki process and which hosts the OSCE headquarters. As a country that also hosted an [important CSCE meeting](#) that helped end the Cold War in 1989 and which actively promoted dialogue on disarmament and other issues when it twice chaired the OSCE (in 2000 and 2017), Austria has a strong interest in seeing the organization make a meaningful contribution to a post-war arrangement in Ukraine and to easing regional tensions more broadly.

Indeed, much depends on when and how the war in Ukraine will finally end, and whether the key players will again see the OSCE - as from 2014 to 2021 - as the “least bad” option for engagement on the ground. An OSCE role would be almost certain for election observation. The Swiss and the OSCE Secretary General would clearly be keen to take on such functions as [ceasefire monitoring](#) or dialogue facilitation. As of now, however, it remains highly uncertain whether the parties might entrust OSCE with significant conflict management responsibilities.

Regarding the OSCE's longer-term position on the European security landscape, there is little evidence for optimism. Nevertheless, past decades have demonstrated the value of a platform to



Citation: Wake, OSCE 50 Years Since the Helsinki Final Act, NSM BLOG January 2026, <https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog>

facilitate dialogue among North American, European and Eurasian states and to pool resources where interests overlap.

Thus, while unlikely that deeply divided OSCE states will again seize the “spirit of Helsinki” from 1975, they would be well advised to keep options open. Maintaining the OSCE machinery, both for its cost-effective contributions to security today and to deal with opportunities that may present themselves in an uncertain future, seems like the best bet for now.

For further reading:

Wolfgang Benedek, Accountability for Grave Human Rights Violations in Belarus. Case Study of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism, TDHJ 2021/2 March 2021.

Bradley Reynolds, [The Spirit of Helsinki at 50: Contemplating Commemoration](#), Security and Human Rights Monitor, 22 September 2021

Thomas Greminger, Human Security – Origins, Power and Potential in Times of Crisis, Considering Ukraine, in: Manfred Nowak/Ursula Werther-Pietsch (eds.), All Human Rights for All. Vienna Guidebook on Peaceful and Inclusive Societies, Vienna – Graz: Intersentia/NWV (2014) 43-47.

Security and Human Rights Monitor, [Special Issue](#) on “The OSCE at 50: Reflections on security, cooperation and human rights”, published on a rolling basis between July and November 2025, curated and edited by Walter Kemp and Christian Strohal.

Marc Perrin de Brichambaut & Loïc Simonet, Austrian Institute for International Affairs, [The Helsinki + 50 Commemoration \(30 July-1 August 2025\)](#)

[Main Takeovers and The Way Forward](#), August 2025.



Douglas Wake is an independent analyst with experience as a diplomat and international civil servant, including as strategic policy expert in the OSCE Secretariat, 1st Deputy Director of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), and head of multiple ODIHR election observation missions. He also participated in the Helsinki+50 reflection process organized by the NGO Civic Solidarity Platform. The views in this article are his own.



Find more of the blog here:

<https://new-school-of-multilateralism.uni-graz.at/en/the-nsm-blog/>