

Map for future –

Helsinki recommendations on
meaningful engagement with civil
society in the OSCE



Foreword

On the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the Helsinki principles live on. The Helsinki legacy is about freedom, democracy, and human rights. The Helsinki+50 Initiative, launched by Finland as Chair of the OSCE in 2025, has reaffirmed that civil society is an essential actor in shaping the future of cooperative and comprehensive security in the OSCE region.

Protecting civic space, the role of human rights defenders and freedom of peaceful assembly are at the core of Finland's foreign and security policy. As OSCE Chair and beyond, Finland prioritises the importance of free civic space and an enabling environment for civil society actors.

The OSCE has long traditions and practices of cooperating with civil society, however, during the current trend of shrinking civic space, the role of civil society needs strengthening, including its role in the OSCE.

We need to redouble our efforts to support civil society actors and human rights defenders across the region.

It is primarily the responsibility of participating States to live up to the standards they have set for themselves – to implement Helsinki principles, OSCE commitments and obligations under international law. At the same time, participating States should refrain from limiting civic space and from restricting freedom of peaceful assembly.

I hope the Helsinki recommendations for enhancing civil society engagement inspire the OSCE, participating States as well as civil society actors to join forces on this path to unleash the positive potential of free people. We should set the bar high and become more ambitious when it comes to cooperation with civil society actors.

Civil society is an agent of positive change in society. This we have also witnessed in Finland, a country that, a century ago, was one of the poorest in Europe. In an enabling environment for civil society, the society maintains and develops its potential and capacity to innovate. Free, strong, and independent civil society is a fundamental cornerstone of a functioning, resilient democracy.

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Introduction

In its role as OSCE Chair and in other capacities, Finland prioritises the importance of free civic space and an enabling environment for civil society actors.

Across the OSCE region, the civic space is closing, restrictions on the rights to freedom of association and peaceful assembly are increasing, fundamental freedoms and human rights are under attack, and human rights defenders face growing challenges in carrying out their work. In fact, according to the CIVICUS report¹ on civic space ratings, only 35% of the OSCE participating States have an open space for civil society to operate, while 11% of States have a civic space that can be labelled as ‘closed’. At the same time, civil society organisations (CSOs) have widely experienced significant funding cuts.

These developments are of great concern. The increasing number of reprisals against human rights defenders on a global scale is alarming. Human rights defenders are particularly threatened, and with the spreading trend of ‘foreign agent’ legislation, aimed at diminishing civic space, such trends call for concerted action, including from the OSCE.

Plurality and heterogeneity are crucial elements of civil society, reflecting the diversity of people. The work of the organisations and human rights defenders representing or promoting the rights of underrepresented persons, including LGBTQIA+ persons, persons with disabilities and Indigenous Peoples, is too often restricted. Meanwhile, anti-rights movements exemplify groups that attack fundamental human rights, thereby disregarding OSCE principles and commitments.

Amid an unstable global environment, the OSCE has the opportunity and responsibility to draw on its strengths and engage more effectively with the knowledge and capabilities of civil society². The OSCE has long traditions and practices of cooperating with civil society, especially in relation to the human dimension³. However, during the current trend of shrinking civic space, the role of civil society needs strengthening – not only within the OSCE but beyond. To this end, as the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office on Civil Society Anu Juvonen has compiled key recommendations for meaningful engagement of civil society in the OSCE.

1 [Global Findings 2024 - Civicus Monitor](#) (accessed 27 August, 2025)

2 [Helsinki50 Civil-Society-Manifesto-eng.pdf](#) (accessed 26th September, 2025) and [Helsinki+50 Reflection Process Outcome Document](#) (accessed 26th September, 2025)

3 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/4/5421540.pdf>

This document aims to provide the building blocks for further assessments, policies, and actions to strengthen civil society cooperation within the OSCE. The document is a collection of recommendations that aim to support the OSCE in ensuring a more systematic, strategic and meaningful engagement with civil society.

The document showcases good practices, presents suggestions covering cross-cutting themes and all OSCE dimensions (politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimension) and includes recommendations for OSCE executive bodies, institutions and participating States.

The document has been drafted based on the input from the OSCE Secretariat and institutions, Special Representative's discussions with different stakeholders, and input from civil society actors. Civic Solidarity Platform, an OSCE-wide network of 110 CSOs from more than 30 countries, has provided its suggestions for preparing the document. The document also draws from other background materials, and those references can be found in the footnotes.

The document proceeds as follows. First, it lists recommendations for both the OSCE and participating States. Then it showcases a few selected recommendations and examples of current civil society engagement in all dimensions, with recommendations for further action.

It is essential to point out that the participating States have the main responsibility for ensuring the safety and security of everyone under their jurisdiction and to honour their international obligations, including implementing the OSCE commitments. As part of the multilateral international rules-based order, participating States must respect the OSCE principles and implement their commitments and decisions. The OSCE, with its expertise and tools can contribute to supporting the implementation of existing commitments.

Towards more meaningful engagement with civil society

The history of the OSCE and a part of its ethos is closely linked to civil society engagement, as joint efforts of the Helsinki groups from various regions together with government actors shaped the human rights framework of the time. The notion of comprehensive security is just as vital today as it was in 1975 when the Helsinki Final Act was signed. Then, it represented a visionary reframing of security – not limited to military balance or geopolitical calculations, but expanded to include respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as key to comprehensive security.

There are at least two main reasons why the OSCE should be actively involved in efforts to protect civil society space. First, the OSCE acquis includes a number of specific commitments related to free and

unobstructed functioning of civil society, including some unique ones, which have no equivalent in other intergovernmental frameworks, such as special guarantees on freedom of movement for NGO representatives / human rights defenders involved in cross-border monitoring of human dimension conditions in participating States. Secondly, recognition of civil society actors as natural allies in upholding the Helsinki principles implies a necessity to protect them from harassment and reprisals to create favourable conditions for their work.

Today, the range of opportunities for CSOs to participate in various OSCE meetings remains, and there are good practices of CSO cooperation. Civil society actors are often invited as speakers and participants to OSCE events across all dimensions. As will be highlighted, the regular participation of civil society experts in the work of the Human Dimension Committee is a good example of such inclusion. Another example is consultations with civil society by the Chairpersonship-in-Office (CiO) on priority topics and relevant themes.



Warsaw Human Dimension Conference 2025

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The establishment of a mandate and the appointment of the CiO Special Representative on Civil Society under North Macedonia's Chairpersonship in 2023, and the continuation of this practice by Malta in 2024 and Finland in 2025, have been important steps forward. However, this mandate needs shaping of more concrete content, developed tools, and necessary resources.

While the Helsinki principles emphasise the comprehensive nature of security, the OSCE's complex and decentralised structure often leads to a compartmentalised approach which does not always effectively address security issues comprehensively. While there are several entry points and areas of functional CSO engagement, certain gaps can be identified in terms of regular, systematic and more meaningful ways to contribute to OSCE activities and decision-making across dimensions.

In seeking a meaningful engagement with and influence on OSCE structures, civil society actors often stumble on the reality that declarations about their participation are not backed by relevant policies, procedures, funding, and professional incentives. Many engagements with civil society actors result in limited impact and lack follow-up.

There is also a need to strengthen the capacity and skills of civil society actors for them to make a meaningful contribution, as OSCE processes, decision-making structures and timetables require an in-depth understanding of the work of the Organization. Diversity and inter-generational knowledge sharing are crucial for developing the skills and capacities of CSOs to make a difference at the OSCE.

Recommendations across dimensions

For Chair

- As a follow-up to Helsinki+50 discussions, ensure the continuation of meaningful civil society participation in the ongoing discussions on OSCE's role in European security.
- Commission an analysis of the existing and potential avenues of civil society engagement in the implementation of the Helsinki principles, including recommendations on strengthening these mechanisms and developing new ones across the three dimensions; identify gaps and needs and build an organization-wide civil society strategy for the OSCE.
- Encourage Chairpersonships to appoint, Special Representative on Civil Society with a clear mandate and allocated resources. Information sharing, including lessons learned among the Troika is also encouraged in order to support the sustainability of the role. Ensure that country visits constitute an essential part of the Special Representative's tasks.

- Hold regular consultations of the OSCE Chairpersonship with civil society on topics considered a priority before the assumption of the Chairpersonship and throughout the year as well as prior to country visits by the CiO or CiO's representative.
- Address increasing reprisals against civil society activists for engaging with OSCE through reprisal mechanisms and protocols to ensure swift response and protection to instances of reprisals where needed.

For OSCE and participating States

- Develop, establish and implement a system to respond to repressive laws and policies restricting civil society space and cases of persecution of human rights defenders and other civic activists and CSOs, with a clear division of labour between relevant OSCE bodies and institutions; adopt and implement a special mechanism for rapid response to reprisals against CSOs and activists for their cooperation with the OSCE. Consider creating a system to monitor and publicly report instances of retaliation against civil society actors arising from their engagement with the OSCE.
- Establish an informal advisory group of independent NGOs, experts, and researchers well-versed in OSCE issues. Mandate the group to scrutinise, fact check, and analyse GONGOs⁴ statements and activities at OSCE events; and review their operations and government connections, culminating in an annual report with detailed observations⁵.

For participating States

Theme 1

Protection of independent civil society in the OSCE region

- The participating States should refrain from attacks, threats, legal harassment and other forms of intimidation, stigmatization and negative labelling of human rights defenders and independent CSOs.
- Adopt a recommendation on the importance of engaging with independent and free civil society.
- For civil society activists and human rights defenders operating in crisis situations, the participating States should facilitate issuing visas on humanitarian grounds, as well as comprehensive (temporary) relocation support. The host states should establish connections with human rights defenders in exile and build trust with them, as a precondition for any meaningful participation.

⁴ GONGOs, in short, are organisations that seem independent but act at the behest of the government.

⁵ [Responding to Shrinking Civic Space in the OSCE Region - Human Rights House Foundation](#)
(accessed 24th September, 2025)

- Consider establishing an informal “group of friends of civil society” which would focus on developing joint strategies on reversing the backlash against civil society, expanding civic space in the OSCE region, and enhancing civil society participation in OSCE work.
- Be vocal about commitments to human rights, democracy, and rule of law as integral to security.
- Recognise shrinking of civic space, as a key early warning sign of a political-military security crisis and a security threat. Expand efforts to strengthen civil society, oppose restrictive policies and legislation, and protect the persecuted activists as part of the OSCE work to ensure comprehensive security and prevent conflicts.

For participating States and the OSCE

Theme 2

Develop systematic mechanisms to engage with civil society

- Institutionalise a cross-dimensional approach in all OSCE activities to ensure practical implementation of the comprehensive security concept and make consistent efforts to overcome the existing compartmentalization of the three dimensions.
- Systematise structured, strategic, and regular mechanisms for CSO engagement across all OSCE dimensions
- Hold regular consultations on OSCE-related matters with national civil society organizations.
- The CiO, OSCE structures and participating States should continue to involve civil society representatives in the OSCE events in all dimensions.
- Create a dedicated mechanism with OSCE field operations to systematically engage CSOs on strategic priorities, aligned with the Organization’s mandate.
- Further efforts are needed to support the institutionalization of CSO engagement in project development and design, monitoring and evaluation, including within the context of security sector reforms.

Theme 3

Work to diversify and broaden the base of CSO partners

- Ensure that the CSOs OSCE cooperates with are drawn from a large and diverse pool of experts and organisations. While acknowledging the value of long-term partnerships, be open to cooperation with new civil society actors and avoid using a limited number of CSOs (“usual suspects”).
- Utilize civil society to translate the Helsinki principles for new generations—through advocacy, education, dialogue, and outreach—to rebuild ownership of the OSCE among the public.
- Give special attention to ensuring inclusive and diverse representation, including youth, women, minorities, persons with disabilities, and local-level participation.
- Ensure that civil society and human rights defenders (HRDs) are included in designing and implementing programs and projects.
- Encourage and support initiatives designed to increase the CSOs’ awareness of the OSCE’s work. Incentivize and support inter-generational knowledge sharing within the CSO community and diversify the pool of CSOs that participating States consult and cooperate with.
- Pay attention in ensuring accessibility of OSCE-related meetings, promoting inclusive participation of diverse civil society representatives, guided by <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/600235>

Theme 4

Improve the functionality of OSCE activities

- Enhance meaningful consultations with CSOs ahead of and in connection with major OSCE meetings in all dimensions and during the planning phase of OSCE programmatic support.
- Build on the best practices established during Helsinki+50 initiative by meaningfully cooperating with civil society actors in talks on our common comprehensive security.
- Recognize the important and legitimate work of human rights defenders and civil society activists and engage constructively with them in an effort to make progress toward the achievement of the OSCE’s objectives and related commitments of participating States.

- Turn events and meetings with civil society representatives into a collaborative process of reflection and planning.
- Work towards establishing accessible and inclusive funding mechanisms for civil society, including emergency funding to support the sustainability and continuous work of CSOs.

To civil society

- Direct efforts to preserve and expand the existing opportunities for civil society engagement in OSCE work and enhance their effectiveness and impact.
- Continue developing proposals on modernizing the Organization and advocating for making it more fit for purpose. Develop and promote concrete recommendations and guidelines for OSCE bodies, institutions and participating States on effective engagement with civil society.
- Strive to build up and exercise civic agency in civil society engagement with the OSCE by moving beyond ceremonial inclusion of CSOs in OSCE events and introduce mechanisms for joint agendasetting, generating feedback loops from OSCE structures and participating States, and institutionalization of advisory roles for CSOs.
- Put forward concrete proposals on action plans and roadmaps for implementation of the OSCE Ministerial Council decisions, and proactively engage with interested participating States and OSCE institutions to discuss the proposals, work together on drafting and implementing decisions.
- Provide more systematic, coordinated and timely reporting and engage in more systematic, coordinated, and timely advocacy efforts on the implementation of OSCE commitments
- Build networks with CSOs working with other international organizations (UN, EU, Council of Europe) for sharing strategies, synergies, and knowledge, in all three dimensions.
- Attend relevant OSCE meetings and take active part, ensuring the voice of independent civil society actors is reflected in the conversations.

The OSCE's First Dimension – Politico-military dimension

In the politico-military dimension the OSCE aims to foster enhanced openness, transparency, and cooperation. It has established one of the most comprehensive systems of arms control and confidence- and security-building measures worldwide. Its activities cover areas such as security sector reform (which spans all three dimensions), as well as the safe management, storage, and disposal of small arms, light weapons, and surplus conventional ammunition. The first dimension also includes the non-military side such as combating trafficking of human beings, actions against terrorism, border management, policing, cyber security and addressing other transnational threats.

The Permanent Council (PC) is the regular body for political dialogue and decision-making among representatives of all participating OSCE States. The Forum for Security Co-operation, in turn, is an autonomous decision-making body where representatives of participating States meet weekly to consult on military stability and security. Under the Permanent Council, there are three committees: the Security Committee, which focuses on non-military issues, the Economic and Environmental Committee, and the Human Dimension Committee. The committees prepare decisions and discuss current issues in their respective dimensions.

The Security Committee plays a key supporting and advisory role in advancing the OSCE's work under its first dimension of security.

Civil society actors offer expertise, early warning capacity, and provide bottom-up support for policies and actions among the affected populations. However, civil society actors, especially in conflict-affected regions, remain an untapped resource.

In contrast to the human dimension, there is no formal mandate for politico-military forums and structures to be open to civil society participation. Unlike in the OSCE's work in its third dimension, (human dimension), civil society has limited possibilities to interact with formal OSCE politico-military structures (e.g., the Forum for Security Co-operation, Conflict Prevention Centre at the OSCE Secretariat). Traditionally, researchers and think-tank experts have been participating in the first dimension meetings of the OSCE. Civil society engagement is often informal, ad-hoc, or symbolic rather than systematic⁶.

Systematic engagement with civil society could contribute to strengthening the OSCE's first dimension through enhancing accountability, transparency and effectiveness of the Organization's work.

6 Ten Points for the Present and the Future: Helsinki+50 Reflection Process Outcome Document. The Civic Solidarity Platform, July 2025. [Link](#)

It is worthwhile important to note that shrinking civic space is not only a sign of eroding democracy but also an early warning of potential conflict. Civil society actors could have a more meaningful role in all stages of conflict cycle and in addressing hybrid threats to security.

The OSCE conflict cycle, consisting of early warning, conflict prevention and resolution, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation, has cross-dimensional elements.

In terms of conflict prevention, civil society actors are well placed to contribute to addressing emerging conflicts by developing early warning indicators, collecting data and engaging with field operations in designing, implementing and evaluating dialogue programs. In situations where tensions are on the rise, and where public opinion is manipulated, civil society actors can positively contribute to easing tensions.

In conflict and post-conflict settings civil society can make a strong contribution to transitional justice by documenting violations of international humanitarian law and fight impunity. Documentation by civil society may be used in legal and truth-seeking processes, provide legal representation and rehabilitation for and rehabilitation of victims of conflict, and be used to counter divisive narratives and enemy images spread by parties to the conflict.

Case 1

In relation to OSCE's support to Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R) activities, partnership with civil society could focus on inclusive policy dialogue and monitoring of sector-specific developments. For example, an OSCE project has supported the establishment of a multi-stakeholder Platform on Democratic Oversight of Security Sector in Armenia. The Platform brings together SSG/R stakeholders representing the security sector and democratic oversight actors, including Parliament, Ombuds-institution and judiciary. The Platform provides a forum for dialogue on key issues related to ongoing security sector reforms in Armenia. In addition, the project has partnered with a media organisation to promote awareness on democratic oversight of security sector. As a result of this collaboration, two Public Service Announcements (PSAs) were produced and widely disseminated through Armenian media outlets.

OSCE's support to Security Sector Governance and Reform (SSG/R) (2014 to 2024)

Case 2

In 2021, Parallel Civil Society Conference presented the Stockholm Declaration on the Need to Critically Review and Strengthen the OSCE's Work on Conflicts to Strengthen Security, Protect Human Rights and Uphold the Helsinki Principles⁷. This was based on a deliberative process involving several dozen human rights, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, women's organisations and other CSOs, including groups from conflict-affected areas and organisations of internally displaced persons. The document contains recommendations to OSCE bodies, institutions, and participating States on conceptual approaches, capacity and institutional arrangements, early warning and conflict prevention, crisis response and conflict resolution, post-conflict transformation and peacebuilding, and engagement with civil society. Following the release of the Declaration, CSOs engaged in advocacy with relevant OSCE structures and participating States on implementation of the recommendations.



Parallel Civil Society Conference on the margins of the OSCE Ministerial Council in Stockholm

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7 [Stockholm Declaration on the Need to Critically Review and Strengthen the OSCE's Work on Conflicts to Strengthen Security, Protect Human Rights and Uphold the Helsinki Principles. The Civic Solidarity Platform, December 2021.](#)
[Link](#)

Examples of Civil Society Engagement in the First Dimension

Conflict cycle work:

- Providing early warning information from the ground in conflict-affected areas.
- Supporting early action by documenting risks and alerting OSCE bodies.
- CSOs offer first-hand insights from conflict zones (local knowledge, legitimacy among affected populations). They document propaganda, disinformation, and hate speech that fuel conflicts.
- CSOs engage with the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) by sharing evidence of discrimination or ethnic tensions.
- CSOs conduct human rights monitoring, provide analysis and expertise that strengthens public scrutiny of security sector actors (such as the police, military and border management) and is vital to strengthen human rights compliance in the first dimension.

Peace processes & mediation:

- Civil society has been active in transitional justice, documenting violations of international humanitarian law to combat impunity and promote accountability.
- CSOs and grassroots actors facilitate community-level dialogue in Track-2 and Track-3 processes (complementing official negotiations).

Societal resilience

- Civil society plays a role in countering nationalist narratives and hate speech that escalate tensions.
- Human rights defenders, women's groups, and youth activists act as peacebuilders, strengthening social cohesion and promoting non-violent solutions.

Capacity-building and advocacy:

- Civil society contributes expertise on arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation debates (though access here is still limited compared to human dimension work).
- CSOs advocate for greater transparency and inclusion in politico-military forums, which are often closed to them.

Recommendations related to the Politico-Military Dimension

Recommendations to Civil Society

- Raise awareness of conventional arms control and confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) to build transparency and trust.
- Engage in debates and contribute expertise on military security issues, such as arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation.
- Promote public dialogue about military security, connecting experts, policymakers, and the public.

Recommendations to the OSCE

- Create spaces and processes for systematically including civil society in meetings and discussions in the first dimension of the OSCE, actively leverage the untapped potential of civil society's work in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict rehabilitation.
- Enhance coordination, communication, and cooperation with civil society at all stages of the conflict cycle, including by establishing communication platforms and mechanisms for each specific conflict. This should include the development of regular and secure mechanisms for civil society contributions and systematic consideration of civil society input in conflict-related decision-making.
- Enhance transparency and collaboration in the Conflict Prevention Centre's early warning system by establishing structured civil society engagement, appointing a civil society liaison, broadening partnerships, and making key early warning information publicly accessible.
- Include civil society in mediation and dialogue facilitation. Follow the UN Guidance for Effective Mediation (2012) and ensure the inclusion of civil society in mediation and dialogue facilitation processes⁸.
- Establish sustainable channels of engagement for CSOs with relevant OSCE bodies, including the Forum for Security Co-operation, the Security Committee, the Secretariat (especially the Conflict Prevention Centre and the Transnational Threats Department and the HCNM⁹).
- Institutionalise broad and meaningful civil society participation from both research and practice fields in dialogues in the politico-military dimension, moving beyond invitations to think tanks or academic institution. Ensure inclusion of a broad range of civil society groups and grassroots organizations from conflict-affected regions.

⁸ <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/default/files/document/files/2022/09/guidanceeffectivemediationundpa2012englishO.pdf>

⁹ Cerny Ehetsham, N., Koller C. From Crisis response to sustainable peace: Strengthening civil society's role in OSCE conflict work. June 2025. [Link](#)

- Embed gender equality principles and gender analysis in the OSCE comprehensive security framework and along the whole conflict cycle to ensure women's active participation in all stages of conflict resolution and peacebuilding at the community, regional and multilateral levels within the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) framework. Support the OSCE participating States to implement the actions they have pledged to undertake in the OSCE-wide WPS Roadmap, such as advancing the WPS work networks and women-led CSOs.
- Promote intergenerational dialogue and integrate youth perspectives into conflict prevention and resolution efforts, including mediation support, early warning systems, and policy advice, in alignment with the Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) framework, also considering recommendations of the upcoming OSCE-wide YPS Roadmap launched by Finland in its capacity as OSCE Chair.
- Proactively reach out to diverse CSOs on peace and security, the traditional human rights community and other diverse civil society actors. Foster collaboration, coordination, and mutual learning across regions, borders, and cultural divides¹⁰.
- Given the increasing use of hybrid practices to undermine stability and security, including through propaganda, disinformation, and election interference, further develop necessary responses to address these threats comprehensively with civil society actors.
- Ensure that civil society and community-based organizations are included in post-conflict mediation and recovery to challenge lingering harmful and hateful narratives and prevent future escalation.

The OSCE's Second Dimension - Economic and Environmental Dimension

Economic and environmental factors can pose risks, threats, and challenges to security and stability. Within the economic and environmental dimension, the OSCE supports its participating States in advancing good governance and environmental responsibility by combating corruption, encouraging the sustainable use of shared natural resources, and promoting effective management of environmental waste.

Across the OSCE region, attacks on environmental defenders are increasing. Environmental human rights defenders face increasing threats, which makes it vital for the institution to step up to safeguard these defenders and in highlighting the fundamental contribution of their work to addressing the climate crisis. The multidimensional nature of the crisis demands this—whether the challenges involve migration, conflict, environmental degradation, gender equality, food security, or the many other issues affected by climate change, civil society engagement is indispensable if we are to achieve meaningful and sustainable outcomes. On the 3rd annual OSCE Climate Conference, June 2025, it was highlighted that enabling environment for public participation and civic engagement is a fundamental prerequisite for developing sustainable solutions and effectively managing the climate crisis¹¹.

Without active engagement with civil society, ensuring environmental security and addressing the climate crisis within the OSCE framework. However, as of now, inclusion of civil society in addressing environmental security challenges has been insufficient.

A multi-stakeholder approach is needed, to tackle these global challenges in order to address this cross-dimensional and interconnected problem. For instance, in the Stockholm Ministerial Council in 2021 it was stated that “[e]ncourages the participating States to pursue a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling climate change by actively engaging the private sector, academia, civil society and all other relevant stakeholders, including women’s and youth organizations”¹².

11 OSCE Chairpersonship Conference on Climate and Security: Unleashing the Potential of the Comprehensive Approach – Chair’s Summary (June, 2025) [Link](#)

12 Decision No. 3/21 “Strengthening Cooperation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change,” [Link](#)

Case:

ExB Assessment of Environmental Impacts from the War against Ukraine and Options for Remediation

The Office of the Co-ordinator for OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) developed and has been successfully implementing the extra-budgetary project **Assessment of environmental impacts of the war against Ukraine and Options for Remediation** since October 2022, at the request of Ukraine and with support from several donor participating States (e.g. USA, Germany, France, Finland, United Kingdom, Poland, Ireland, and Luxembourg). Through this initiative, the OSCE has been one of the leading organizations working on this topic within the framework of the *Informal Inter-agency Coordination Group on Environmental Assessments in Ukraine* comprised of UN and other international agencies – UNECE, UNDP, UNEP, OECD, World Bank, among others. Civil society representatives from Ukraine took part in most of the meetings and webinars of the Coordination Group, where results and materials were actively discussed.

Some of the notable results include development and release of the Summary of the Preliminary Assessment in March 2024, development of thematic briefs on specific issues, such as water-related impacts, disaster risk reduction, hazardous facilities and objects, among others, and support for relevant capacity-building activities. Considerable effort has been dedicated to examining the environmental data needs for Ukraine's Green Recovery and support for the database on environmental damages.

The project team and experts have participated and presented materials in relevant major international events, conferences, and fora, where civil society organizations actively participated and contributed. Notably, wider discussions were generated as a result of presenting the Summary of the Preliminary Assessment at the **Verkhovna Rada** (Ukraine Parliament) Hearings dedicated to “Reconstruction of Ukraine” on 8 April 2024, as well as presenting the Green Recovery Platform Data Hub concept by the project team and experts at the **Stakeholder Forum for the Green Recovery Platform for Ukraine** on 7 April 2025 in Kyiv.



OSCE Chairpersonship Conference on Climate and Security © MFA

Examples of Civil Society Engagement – Second Dimension

Environmental monitoring and data collection

- CSOs and local groups gather first-hand environmental data on issues like emissions, pollution, and resource use.
- Civil society networks help document climate-related security risks, including cross-border impacts.

Aarhus Centres

- CSOs play an important role in supporting Aarhus Convention implementation across the OSCE region. These centres, operated mainly by CSOs, act as repositories of information, local engagement hubs, and bridges between communities, governments, and the OSCE.

Advocacy and accountability

- CSOs push participating States to uphold their commitments on anti-corruption, transparency, and good governance.
- CSOs raise awareness about environmental defenders facing persecution and push for their protection.

Public awareness and mobilisation

- Civil society builds public understanding of climate change, environmental degradation, and sustainable development as security issues.

- Young people act as a driving force and mobilizers both as actors in civil society organizations and as key change agents in raising awareness about climate and environmental issues.
- Local organisations support community cooperation across borders on shared challenges like water management and disaster response.

Policy input and expertise

- Civil society experts contribute to OSCE forums, seminars, and working groups on energy security, climate change, and environmental justice.
- Independent research institutes and CSOs provide analysis that feeds into OSCE discussions and reports.

It is worth noting that despite these examples, civil society's inclusion is at times inconsistent and often tokenistic. Thus, many OSCE environmental and economic forums and structures need to enhance more systematic engagement.

Recommendations related to the Economic & Environmental Dimension

To Civil Society

- Promote good governance by monitoring corruption, transparency, and accountability and report on the findings to the OSCE.
- Monitor human rights implications and impact on civic space of measures to counter the financing of terrorism and anti-money laundering (CFT/AML) and report on the findings to relevant OSCE actors.
- Raise awareness about environmental challenges like climate change, energy security, and resource management.
- Support cooperation between local communities and participating States on environmental protection.

To the OSCE

- Enhance CSOs' role as strategic partners in the work of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA). Create more opportunities for input from civil society by relevant OSCE bodies, such as the OCEEA, the OSCE Economic and Environmental Forum, and the Economic and Environmental Committee, and include them in monitoring, reporting, analysis, deliberations and program development, implementation and assessment.

- More vigorously include civil society in OSCE work on environmental security and climate change to ensure that environmental programs of OSCE bodies and participating States use the data they collect and solutions they propose.
- Advance regional multi-stakeholder cooperation on environmental risks, disaster response, and climate security by utilizing CSOs' expertise and networks. Strengthen capacity building for CSOs working on environmental and climate issues, similar to its support for human rights organizations, offer training and financial support for local environmental initiatives. Consider establishing a dedicated funding mechanism by participating States for supporting long-term research and data collection by civil society and research organisations.
- Strengthen and enhance the work by Aarhus centres by, inter alia, improving synergies between the annual Aarhus Centres' meeting and other second dimension meetings.
- Utilize the existing mandates of relevant Special Representatives and ODIHR to strengthen the support for environmental and climate defenders and to report and monitor their situation.
- Develop the annual HDIM/WHDC to include thematic sessions on the situation of environmental and human rights defenders.
- Support participating States in addressing corruption, improving governance, and recognizing and utilizing CSOs' role in strengthening accountability.

The OSCE's Third Dimension – Human Dimension

Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms is key to the OSCE's comprehensive security concept. All OSCE participating States have agreed that lasting security cannot be achieved without respect for human rights and functioning democratic institutions. They have committed themselves to a comprehensive catalogue of human rights and democracy norms. These form the basis of what the OSCE calls the "human dimension" of security¹³.

OSCE helps its participating States strengthen democratic institutions; hold genuine and transparent democratic elections; promote gender equality; ensure respect for human rights, media freedom, the rights of persons belonging to national minorities, and the rule of law; and promote tolerance and non-discrimination¹⁴. OSCE's autonomous institutions, namely Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFOM) and the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), play a key role in supporting OSCE participating States in implementing their human dimension commitments.

The Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) is the principal institution of the OSCE responsible for the human dimension. ODIHR is active throughout the OSCE area in the fields of election observation, democratic development, human rights, tolerance and non-discrimination, and the rule of law. Across all its programmatic departments and thematic portfolios ODIHR cooperates closely with civil society, including in the development of policy guidance tools and resources, provision of expert advice, capacity building for various actors (such as security sector institutions and oversight bodies as well as other stakeholders) and in monitoring and promoting dialogue between civil society and state authorities to further the implementation of international human rights obligations and OSCE commitments by participating States.¹⁵ As part of this work, ODIHR also has dedicated programmatic activities to strengthen the protection of human rights defenders and civic space, including monitoring and reporting, as well as capacity building and tailored support to help human rights defenders conduct their work safely and securely.¹⁶

Europe's largest annual human rights conference – the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) – brings together hundreds of government officials, international experts, civil society representatives and human rights activists to take stock of how states are implementing their commitments in the human dimension, that is, the core values that promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This mandated meeting is organised by ODIHR¹⁷. In recent years, lack of

13 [What is the human dimension? | OSCE](#) (accessed 24th September, 2025)

14 <https://www.osce.org/what-we-do> (accessed 24th September, 2025)

15 <https://www.osce.org/odihr>

16 e.g. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/596500>

17 [Human Dimension Implementation Meetings | OSCE](#) (accessed 26th September, 2025)

consensus has prevented organization of HDIMs, but similar platform for dialogue has been offered through the Warsaw Human Dimension Conferences, organised by the OSCE Chair-personships with support from ODIHR. Also, the three mandated annual Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (SHDM) and Human Dimension Seminars are important forums to address OSCE commitments and their implementation.

OSCE structures and participating States have at their disposal an extensive set of tools for protecting civic space, such as ODIHR's monitoring of freedom of peaceful assembly and trial monitoring, invoking the Moscow and the Vienna mechanisms specifically regarding situations when civil society is under attack, issuing statements and public interventions, using country visits to raise questions with authorities regarding the persecution of civic activists, the adoption of resolutions by the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. However, these tools could be used more effectively and strategically. Moreover, relevant efforts by various OSCE stakeholders need to be better coordinated and streamlined.

There is a sense of frustration among the CSO communities about the lack of practical impact of OSCE's work and its effect on the real situation of human security in their countries. This void is being filled by actors supporting or representing a position of authoritarian states as well as groups promoting conservative anti-human rights agenda.

Case 1:

Support to civil society organisations in reporting monitored hate incidents

Each year, ODIHR collects data on hate incidents provided by more than 125 civil society organizations (CSOs) from across the OSCE region, and publishes them alongside official data and information on the country pages of its dedicated Hate Crime Report (HCR) website¹⁸.

ODIHR's HCR is the only public source of information to include descriptions of individual hate incidents from across the OSCE region, thereby giving voice to the experiences of individuals targeted in bias-motivated attacks and their communities. Publishing incidents reported by CSOs alongside official data from states addresses the issue of under-recording and under-reporting by states and demonstrates the importance of CSOs' work as well as encouraging further cooperation and hate crime and incident monitoring.

18 <https://hatecrime.osce.org/>

Throughout the process, ODIHR supports CSOs in a number of ways. The Office organizes public webinars on how to recognize and report hate incidents; offers monitoring templates that can also be used for the national monitoring efforts; responds to specific questions from CSOs and provides feedback on their reporting to ODIHR; allows CSOs to consult their incidents before they are published; recognizes their contributions via a dedicated webpage¹⁹ and by indicating the source of each incident; and provides customized training on monitoring hate incidents and crimes, and coalition building²⁰.

CSOs themselves benefit from this engagement, gaining increased international awareness of their work. CSOs can harness information about hate crime and incident trends and efforts to address them, ultimately using the HCR to effectively advocate for policy changes in their countries. Throughout the process, CSOs maintain contact with ODIHR, which often leads to further opportunities for cooperation with ODIHR and other CSOs.

Examples of Engagement with Civil Society – Third Dimension

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)

- Provides support, assistance and expertise to participating States and civil society to promote democracy, rule of law, human rights and tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR observes elections, reviews legislation and advises governments on how to develop and sustain democratic institutions. The Office conducts training programs, for example, for government and law-enforcement officials on how to uphold human rights, and for non-governmental organizations on how to monitor, promote and advocate for human rights. ODIHR also conducts training for election observers, where CSOs are also included. Furthermore, ODIHR has a dedicated work programme to strengthen the protection of human rights defenders and it provides tailored support in various forms to strengthen and facilitate human rights work of civil society in different contexts (human rights defenders in general, human rights at borders, equality and non-discrimination of Roma and Sinti, hate crime, etc.)²¹
- ODIHR has traditionally engaged with CSOs throughout its work on election monitoring, support to the rule of law, democracy, human rights, and to advance tolerance and non-discrimination. ODIHR also involves CSO representatives as experts in its advisory panels and in the process of drafting guidelines.
- ODIHR promotes meaningful and effective engagement of civil society in policy- and lawmaking processes.

¹⁹ <https://hatecrime.osce.org/contributors>

²⁰ [Coalition Building for Tolerance and Non-Discrimination: A Practical Guide | OSCE](#)

²¹ <https://www.osce.org/odihr/guidelines-on-the-protection-of-human-rights-defenders>

- ODIHR engages civil society organizations throughout the entire electoral cycle, beginning with the Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) and continuing through election observation and the follow-up process. During the NAM, ODIHR consults a broad range of civil society actors, including election-focused NGOs, human rights organizations, and advocacy groups, to gather their assessments of the pre-electoral environment and to identify key areas of concern. During election observation missions, civil society contributes as a vital source of contextual and technical information. Following elections, ODIHR maintains dialogue with civil society to support the dissemination, discussion, and implementation of recommendations. Civil society organizations are encouraged to use ODIHR's findings as an advocacy and reform tool, helping to promote transparency, inclusivity, and accountability within the broader democratic process.

Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) / Warsaw Human Dimension Conference (WHDC), Supplementary Human Dimension Meetings (SHDM), Human Dimension Seminar, Human Dimension Committee meetings

- The human dimension of the OSCE provides a unique platform for open civil society participation. The Helsinki 1992 document²² recognises the need for input from non-governmental actors (groups, individuals, organizations) in strengthening democratic structures, peace and human rights. The participation of civil society in human dimension events should not be limited unless for “persons or organisations which resort to the use of violence or publicly condone terrorism or the use of violence.”
- CSOs have traditionally been very active in HDIM/WHDC (the OSCE's largest annual human rights meeting), other regular meetings and various side events. They use these platforms to present reports, testimonies, and recommendations directly to governments and OSCE institutions by taking part in plenary discussions, organizing side events, and holding bilateral meetings with delegations of participating States and OSCE institutions. Civil society actors are invited as speakers to all human dimension events.

Parallel Civil Society Conferences

- The Civil Society Parallel Conference (CSPC), organised by OSCE-wide network, the Civic Solidarity Platform, takes place annually on the eve of OSCE Ministerial Council meetings. CSPC presents civil society declarations with recommendations to participating States and OSCE structures and hands them over to the Troika ministers and leaders of OSCE institutions who deliver their comments in response.

Documentation & monitoring

- CSOs document human rights violations, shrinking civic space, persecution of activists, restrictions on media, and election irregularities.

22 [Helsinki Summit 1992](#)

- Their reports often serve as inputs to OSCE monitoring activities, as well as the tools such as Moscow Mechanism and ODIHR Ukraine monitoring. For example, ODIHR's report on Ukraine calls for support and funding for civil society in providing humanitarian assistance and documenting violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights violations²³. Inputs and information received from civil society are important for OSCE and its institutions in supporting participating States in upholding their human dimension commitments.



2025 Warsaw Human Dimension Conference

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Support to human rights defenders

- ODIHR adopted Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders²⁴ (2014); monitors the situation with security of human rights defenders across the OSCE region, has produced reports on the situation of human rights defenders across the OSCE region and in particular participating States, regularly raises cases of persecution with the national authorities, makes visits to their detention facilities, and provides capacity building to civil society organisations on monitoring of security situation of human rights defenders. ODIHR closely works with civil society and relevant intergovernmental organizations to address the problem.²⁵
- Participating States raise particular cases of persecution of human rights defenders at the Permanent Council meetings and adopts joint statements. An informal group of participating States, Democracy Defender Initiative, holds thematic seminars during the HDIM/WHDC, awards annual Democracy

²³ <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/5/5946344.pdf>, p.68

²⁴ Guidelines on the Protection of Human Rights Defenders. OSCE/ODIHR, 2014. [Link](#)

²⁵ Human rights defenders. Section at ODIHR's website. [Link](#)

Defender prize to outstanding human rights defenders and civil society organisations during an annual ceremony.

- Civil Solidarity Platform provides support for persecuted human rights defenders through public statements, visits to participating States, trial observation, and sending information on particular cases of persecution to OSCE executive bodies and ODIHR.

Addressing closing civic space

- ODIHR adopted joint OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Freedom of Association²⁶ (2015) and offer advice and expertise to participating States on how to legislate on freedom of association-related matters in a manner that is compliant with international human rights standards and OSCE commitments. ODIHR offers assistance to civil society organizations to support advocacy in this field of law-making and public policy.
- OSCE bodies and participating States address the problem of closing civic space, restrictions of freedom of association and backlash against civil society, including adoption of “foreign agent” and “undesirable organizations” legislation, misuse of anti-extremism and counter-terrorism legislation and policies for a crackdown on civil society. These efforts include providing legislative advice and comments on draft laws; raising these issues with delegations and governments during country visits; holding consultations with CSO experts and activists; cooperating with relevant intergovernmental partners; speaking at the OSCE Permanent Council and public forums, including OSCE human dimension events and Parallel Civil Society Conferences; and issuing joint statements..

Advocacy & campaigns

- Civil society pushes OSCE participating States to reaffirm the Helsinki principles, human rights obligations, democracy, and the rule of law.
- Civil society plays a key role in reaffirming that respect of the concept of comprehensive security and of the notion that implementation of human dimension commitments “are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the State concerned²⁷” are non-negotiable and should remain central to the European security order.
- CSOs have consistently advocated for invocation of the Vienna and the Moscow Mechanisms and for taking effective follow-up steps after the release of the reports to work on implementing their recommendations.
- CSOs campaign for media freedom, tolerance, and advocate action against disinformation, propaganda and hate speech.

26 Joint OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission Guidelines on Freedom of Association. OSCE/ODIHR, 2015. [Link](#)
27 Document of the Moscow Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension of the CSCE [Link](#), p. 29

Public engagement

- Civil society plays an important role in raising awareness among citizens about the Helsinki principles, human rights, and the OSCE's missions, working to generate respect, support and ownership of the Helsinki process by members of the general public.
- This “bottom-up” mobilisation creates public demand for accountability when states violate OSCE commitments.

Recommendations related to the Human Dimension

To Civil Society

- Make consistent efforts to overcome civil society's artificial confinement to the third OSCE dimension with its exclusion from the first and second dimensions. Actively seek inclusion in OSCE discussions beyond the human dimension by engaging constructively with participating States and OSCE structures, and by building new partnerships with “non-traditional” CSO actors—including the private sector, academia, and think tanks—to highlight the added value of civil society expertise in advancing comprehensive security.
- Share data and experience related to hate crimes and incidents for ODIHR's annual reporting.
- Invite ODIHR to support capacity-building and awareness-raising activities within local contexts, improve hate crime recording and prosecution, reinforce security structures for vulnerable communities, support education systems to prevent prejudice and discrimination, and foster dialogue to challenge intolerance.
- Reiterate that repression of human rights defenders, independent journalists and human rights lawyers is a critical security issue; strengthen legal, digital, and material support systems for persecuted civic groups and activists, especially those in exile or under authoritarian regimes; develop mutual aid protocols and emergency response networks, drawing from the experience of solidarity under pressure; form civic resilience networks to ensure protection and continuity of work despite repression; use the OSCE platforms to highlight attacks on civic actors as threats to the integrity of the Helsinki principles.
- Build durable and intersectional coalitions; reach beyond the traditional alliances by building bridges and proactively establishing cross-sectoral, intersectional, and intergenerational alliances e.g. with environmental human rights defenders, feminist movements, LGBTQ+ networks, indigenous peoples.

To the OSCE

- Put the problem of shrinking civil society space and the persecution of human rights defenders and other civil society representatives much higher on the OSCE agenda; regard reprisals against civil society actors for cooperation with the OSCE as an attack on the OSCE itself and its concept of comprehensive security.
- Consider activating ODIHR's work on securing civil society space by developing a system of indicators for the freedom of association and security of human rights defenders, holding systematic monitoring of the situation in participating States, producing regular and ad hoc reports, and reinstating a dedicated 'focal point on human rights defenders' and publicly disseminating the information about it and its contacts.
- Organise special events at the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) on the issue of protecting civil society space and the persecution of activists and encourage its members to bring these discussions to their national parliaments; reestablish a mandate for the OSCE PA Special Representative on civil society.
- Further strengthen OSCE autonomous institutions, including ODIHR, High Commissioner on National Minorities, and Representative on Freedom of the Media, and ensure their more strategic engagement with a broad range of CSOs.
- Make a more strategic and efficient use of the HDIM/WHDC and raise awareness within the OSCE on the negative role of GONGOS.
- Continue calling for the protection of civil society space in participating States and offer OSCE/ODIHR expertise to implement OSCE commitments with respect to the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- Respond more effectively to democratic backsliding, restrictions on media, and violations of rights through various tools such as the Moscow and Vienna mechanisms, effective follow-up to reports of these mechanisms, and through public communication by OSCE leadership.
- Establish, develop and support politically independent platforms for the participation of CSOs in public policy development and human rights monitoring.
- Promote an enabling legal framework for civil society and the meaningful and inclusive engagement of civil society at all stages of policy- and law-making processes, while supporting public institutions to set up mechanisms facilitating such engagement and ensuring enhanced participation of women, representatives of minority groups, persons with disabilities and other marginalized or under-represented groups in all phases of developing policies, legislation and programmes.
- Promote a safe and enabling environment for civil society actors and eliminate legal and administrative barriers that hinder civil society's work.

