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Chapter 24

OSCE's Resilience in Times of War



Jelena Cupać

24.1 Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has created an existential crisis for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), further compounded by the fact that the war is occurring between its two core participating states. The problem is that the OSCE has no sanctioning powers over its participating states, such as Russia, for violating its comprehensive, cooperative, and indivisible security concept. But also that the war is jeopardizing many of its vital organizational functions, from adopting a budget to extending the mandates of its field operations. Many commentators and practitioners wonder if the Organization can survive under such enormous pressure and, if yes, in what form. However, such queries about the OSCE's current predicament and future outlook are rarely followed by an analysis of its resilience grounded in research on international organizations (IOs). Using primary sources such as landmark OSCE documents, as well as information provided by the secondary literature, this chapter aims to do just that. It seeks to offer an informed assessment of the OSCE's resilience and spell out what it might mean for its short- and long-term prospects.

In recent years, International Relations scholars have turned their attention to a more systematic study of IO resilience and fragility (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, 2021; Gray, 2018, 2020; Hirschmann, 2021). As a result, we now have a rich catalog of insights into how specific formal characteristics of IOs, such as their issue area, membership, and the quality of their bureaucracy, relate to their chances of failing during or persevering through economic, political, and security upheavals. The chapter leverages these insights to evaluate the OSCE's prospects amid the war in Ukraine. However, it does not stop there. It also introduces another dimension of IOs' resilience, namely their relationship with the environment

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in which they operate. By drawing on the concept of ontological security, the paper proposes that if this relationship has been ineffective for years, the external shock will not affect an IO as severely as initially assumed. Resilience can thus paradoxically be found in those aspects of an organization previously seen as dysfunctional. In the case of the OSCE, this refers to the long-standing tendency of participating states to use its high-level fora not to affect Europe's security constructively but primarily to air their grievances about such developments as NATO's expansion and democratic deterioration.

With this in mind, judging by formal organizational criteria such as issue area, membership/participation, age, and the strength of its bureaucracy, the OSCE emerges as a highly fragile IO. Considering that the reforms necessary to make this IO more resilient are unlikely when participating states' preferences diverge strongly, the pressure of the war in Ukraine is likely to lead to the OSCE's organizational decline. This will likely take the form of organizational shrinking, understood here as a reduction to its forum function (e.g., the Permanent Council) and the limitation (or even abolishment) of its more practical bodies and engagements. However, this shrinking is unlikely to favor cooperation. Instead, it is more likely to mean a reduction to the OSCE's conflictual domains, those that the shock of the war has not damaged but further reinforced, namely the perpetual blame and shame games among its participating states.

24.2 The Resilience of International Organizations

International Relations scholars have only recently begun focusing more systematically on the resilience of IOs, pursuing questions such as why some IOs survive longer than others and why some thrive. In contrast, why others never seem to find their footing, and why many never even get off the ground. It may be surprising that these questions are being raised only now if we know that nearly 40% of all IOs created since 1815 no longer exist (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, 2021). However, the relative success of multilateralism after the Second World War, especially after the Cold War, has drawn scholarly attention toward prominent and influential IOs while glossing over those that hobbled in the background (Gray, 2018, 2020). Recent challenges to IOs underpinning the liberal international order, from Brexit to Donald Trump's threats to withdraw the USA from NATO, have provoked a shift in focus. By creating and exploring comprehensive IO datasets and delving into the histories of failing IOs, scholars are beginning to outline the factors responsible for the resilience and fragility of IOs.

Accordingly, Mette Eilstrup-Sangiovanni (2018, 2021), who has been at the forefront of IO resilience research, has observed that, while it is not unusual for IOs to die during peacetime, they are far more likely to disband during significant economic and geopolitical turmoil. And this observation holds equally true for large-scale geostrategic upheavals such as the two world wars and regional developments such as

the Great Depression and decolonization. However, although external shocks generally increase the chances of IO death, there are significant differences between organizations: while some quickly falter under external pressure, others show remarkable levels of resilience. To find out why this is the case, Eilstrup-Sangiovanni has examined the individual characteristics of IOs. She has thus demonstrated that, compared to other types of IOs, international security organizations have the highest mortality hazard. From 1815 to 2016, they were more than twice as likely to die in the studied period than technical organizations (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021, p. 287). The difference is explained by the political salience of the issue area: international security organizations are at risk of succumbing to the same animosities they are tasked to manage.

Membership or, more precisely, participation in the OSCE's case, too, is a strong predictor of IO resilience and fragility. To begin with, IOs with global membership have been significantly more durable than regional organizations. Historically, European IOs have had the highest hazard rates. Since 1815, they have been seven times more likely to die than global IOs, with only three surviving the First World War. African and American IOs have fared slightly better, being six times more likely to die than global organizations. Statistically significant numbers cannot be calculated for Asian IOs as they are young and few in number (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2020, pp. 354–356).

Eilstrup-Sangiovanni has also found a correlation between the number of member states and IO resilience: the more members an organization has, the less likely it is to dissolve, and vice versa (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021, p. 287). The correlation is explained by the greater availability of human and budgetary resources that might counteract temporary disruptions and allow for experimentation and innovation, essential hallmarks of organizational adaptability. At the same time, a large membership increases the likelihood that, even in times of crisis, an organization will continue to be valuable to at least some member states, who will, as a result, invest resources in maintaining it.

Age also appears to play a role in IO resilience. The frequency of IO deaths is highest in the first three decades of their existence. Mortality rates drop markedly when they are between 30 and 50 years old and are the lowest when they reach 50 and beyond (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni, 2021, p. 287). Accordingly, the older an IO is, the less likely it is to die. The reasons for this are multiple, from the vested interests of their members and better embeddedness in the environment to more robust learning and coordination capacities.

IO resilience is also affected by bureaucracy-related factors. Large numbers also contribute to greater resilience: the larger the bureaucracy, the more vital an IO is and the more likely it is to survive (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Gray, 2018, 2020; Hirschmann, 2021). Maria Debre and Hylke Dijkstra's research shows that the size of IO secretariats is particularly significant. Organizations with secretariats that have more than 50 staff members are considerably less likely to dissolve (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021, p. 322). The quality of bureaucracy also matters, with high levels of bureaucratic professionalization and autonomy positively associated with resilience (Gray, 2018; Hirschmann, 2021). A large and high-quality bureaucracy has the ability and

resources to improve cooperation between member states, especially during crisis periods when compromise seems out of reach and requires some form of mediation. Such bureaucracy can also recognize and realize opportunities for keeping an organization afloat, such as finding alternative financing models or building coalitions with civil and private sectors. However, it is essential to recognize the limitations of bureaucracy. Sometimes even a strong bureaucracy might choose to hunker down, thus being less effective in influencing the course of a struggling organization (Hirschmann, 2021, pp. 1965–1966). This scenario can happen when tensions between member states are so high that bureaucratic activity, including more vigorous defense of organizational principles, might be interpreted as favoring one side in the dispute.

24.3 International Organization's Resilience Vis-a-Vis Their Environment

These general insights into IO resilience are highly valuable as they provide us with tools to more systematically assess the resilience of individual IOs such as the OSCE when confronted with external upheavals. However, there are still domains that this relatively young research has overlooked. One is the nature of the relationship between an IO and its environment. Here, the environment refers to extra-organizational developments in the geographical region and the issue area in which an IO is active. From this perspective, for example, NATO's eastward expansion and the Russian invasion of Ukraine would be seen as developments in the OSCE's environment, even though both involve the OSCE's participating states.

As time passes, each IO develops a special relationship with its environment. Some become highly skilled problem solvers with significant influence over environmental developments, while others merely reflect environmental challenges and fault lines, having little or no impact on them. Most IOs find themselves on the spectrum between these two extremes, often even fluctuating between them during their history. However, extreme fluctuations are rare. Much more often, IOs develop stable patterns of interaction with their environment. These patterns influence how an IO will perceive an external shock and, in turn, how resilient it will be to it. Accordingly, the intensity of the external shock might not be interpreted solely based on some objective measure of the shock's severity and the features of an IO's institutional design. It may also depend on whether it will fundamentally change the pattern of the IO's relationship with its environment and, consequently, the way the IO is used to functioning as an organization.

A successful IO, accustomed to shaping its environment by solving its problems, can be vulnerable to external shocks that prevent it from having the same impact. In contrast, an IO such as the OSCE, which has long had a problematic relationship with its environment, and whose participating states and bureaucrats have struggled to create and implement impactful policies, could fare much better. An external

shock may not disrupt its already strained operations, making it more resilient than initially thought. This would represent a maladaptive rather than adaptive resilience, but resilience nonetheless. It is important to emphasize that this observation may not only apply to an entire organization but also to some of its aspects. Therefore, an external shock might affect an IO's relatively functional and dysfunctional aspects differently, rendering some more resilient.

24.4 Ontological Security and International Organizations

An assertion that an IO that has for years looked like an “inert zombie”, to quote Julia Gray, might be less vulnerable to external shocks than a thriving organization that possesses many of the qualities discussed earlier, may seem counterintuitive, bordering on paradoxical. However, it is not unfounded. It is rooted in the concept from social psychology known as ontological security. The concept has been used extensively to explain the behavior of states but has only recently been picked up by IO researchers (e.g., see Browning, 2018; Della Sala, 2018). Despite its lofty name, ontological security is a relatively simple concept. It describes an actor (be it an individual, a state, or an organization) with confidence in the consistency of its social and material environment and the continuity of its self-identity (Giddens, 1991). An actor with such confidence can continue to exist as an unchanged entity. In other words, an ontologically secure actor, including an IO such as the OSCE, knows its place in the world and how to act within it (Cupać, 2020, p. 11).

The concept of ontological security is blind to what the environment should look like or how an actor should behave. Instead, the emphasis is on the relationship between the two and the conditions an actor has learned to navigate. That is why even a relatively chaotic environment can give an actor a sense of security if that is what it is accustomed to. Additional disruption in such an environment would likely affect it less than an actor adapted to more orderly surroundings. This observation, however, should not be understood deterministically: plenty of successful IOs will adjust to external shocks, and plenty of “zombies” will encounter their breaking point. When using ontological security to assess an IO's resilience, it is, therefore, best to take a closer look at the history of its relationship with the environment. This approach cannot produce accurate predictions about an organization's survival. Still, it can offer a new perspective on where an IO is heading and whether something can be done.

24.5 The OSCE's Resilience Evaluated through Formal Factors

With these above-mentioned theoretical insights in mind, this section of the paper aims to assess, as systematically as possible, the OSCE's resilience against the background of the Ukrainian war. To begin with, as an international security organization caught in one of the worst security crises in Europe since the Second World War, the OSCE is on shaky ground. Russia's violation of its fundamental principles and the corresponding indignation of the vast majority of its participating states hinder the Organization's current functioning and call into question the viability of any strategy that would punish Russia and preserve the OSCE simultaneously. However, the OSCE has one advantage concerning its issue area. While it is primarily a security organization, its comprehensive approach to security has led it to engage in numerous activities typically found in general-purpose IOS, from human trafficking and education to gender equality and minority rights. These areas of engagement might be used to keep the OSCE afloat until conditions become more favorable in the politico-military domain.

Like its focus on security, regional membership and European focus might also be read as factors hampering the OSCE's resilience. At the same time, however, it should not be overlooked that the OSCE is the world's largest regional IO, counting 57 participating states spread across three continents. This size might award it with certain benefits relating to resiliency, such as greater chances for the emergence of a group of states interested in maintaining the Organization and providing it with more significant resources, including extra-budgetary donations.

The resilience of the OSCE, as measured by its age, puts it in a relatively good position. The Organization is 48 years old, approaching the 50-year benchmark, after which IOS are least likely to dissolve. But here, too, the OSCE comes with a footnote. For 20 of those 46 years, it functioned as a series of conferences. Only in the past 26 years has it developed into a fully institutionalized organization, albeit without legally binding status. This might signal that the OSCE still needs to create robust learning and coordination mechanisms to help it overcome the crisis. However, these characteristics can be correctly assessed only through in-depth comparative analysis. Here, age should be read only as an indicator.

At first glance, the size of the OSCE's secretariat might spell good news for the Organization's resilience, for it consists of several hundreds of staff members, well above the 50 found in the most resilient IOS. However, due to high staff turnover, a problem further aggravated by the annual budget cycle, the OSCE generally lacks stable bureaucratic expertise and policy continuity (Knill et al., 2016). It is, therefore, not surprising that, in a study of fourteen IOS, its secretariat ranks as the least autonomous (Bauer & Ege, 2016). The role of the Secretary-General does not improve this image, considering that it consists of day-to-day administrative tasks, supporting the Chairperson-in-Office, and reporting, without agenda-setting powers, to the Permanent Council. As a result, the position mainly attracts career

diplomats with little ability to influence participating states or implement significant organizational reforms.

All these factors—security as a problem area, a regional and European focus, age, and an inefficient bureaucracy—paint the OSCE as an organization with a high risk of dying as it faces the Ukrainian war. However, it also displays several idiosyncrasies, namely a broad conception of security and large membership, which may be the reason for a slightly more optimistic assessment. While these might prove valuable in the future, their positive effect on the OSCE remains absent for now. The tensions raised by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the Organization's politico-military dimension also reverberate in normative disputes in its economic, environmental, and especially human rights dimensions, making separating conflict areas and possible cooperation challenging.

24.6 The OSCE's Resilience in a Historical Perspective

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought the OSCE to the brink of collapse in 2022, it is well known that the Organization struggled long before Russia's attack, even before Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Following the end of the Cold War, the OSCE contributed significantly to managing security problems of a smaller scale through its field missions and to facilitating democratization through activities such as election monitoring, promotion of minority rights, and judicial reform. Yet, its high-level decision-making bodies (Ministerial Councils, Summits, and the Permanent Council) have gradually deteriorated into fora reflecting developments and disputes from the Organization's environment, with little or no power to influence these.

The start of the OSCE's deterioration is usually dated to the early 2000s. However, a closer reading of its history reveals that it began much earlier, with common purpose among participating states already visibly diminishing in the second half of the 1990s. During this period, against the background of NATO's intention to expand eastward, the OSCE participating states started negotiations on the "Common and Comprehensive Security Model for Europe for the Twenty-First Century". However, despite its grandiose name and ambition, the negotiations saw five years of gradual widening of the rift among the participating states. Seeking to counterbalance NATO's expansion, Russia was trying to establish the OSCE as the principal security organization in Europe. At the same time, the West wanted to turn it into just one "building block" in the continents' intricate security architecture. This period also saw the renewed prominence of the concept of sovereignty. The West evoked it to justify the right of states to join preferred security treaties and alliances freely. At the same time, Russia referred to it to challenge the idea that internal affairs could be of direct and legitimate concern to all participating states. On the whole, by primarily reflecting their understanding of the developments in the OSCE's environment, talks on the Security Model downgraded the OSCE from a chief builder of the New Europe, as it was imagined in the early 1990s, to just a "*forum* providing directions and

giving impulses to the shaping of the New Europe” (Decisions of the Copenhagen Ministerial Council Meeting 1997).

These divergences continued into the 2000s, manifesting in even less dialogue and compromise. In the 1990s, summits were held regularly; however, between 2000 and 2010, no single summit occurred. Ministerial Council meetings, although uninterrupted, often ended without a usual final joint declaration. The words of the OSCE’s Chairman-in-Office, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, during the 2006 Brussels ministerial, encapsulate well the condition in which the Organization found itself at the time. De Gucht asserted that the OSCE had for long been in an “introspective episode,” making the organization “anemic if not stagnant,” with the looming threat of becoming “paralyzed” (OSCE’s Belgian Chairmanship Press Release, 2006).

The impetus to overcome this state of affairs came after the 2008 financial crisis and the Russian war in Georgia when the OSCE embarked on the Corfu Process initiated by former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. This round of dialogue was aimed at “reconfirming, reviewing, and reinvigorating” the OSCE’s concept of comprehensive, cooperative, and indivisible security. However, in the end, it, too, reflected the developments from the OSCE’s environment and the dissatisfaction that accompanied them rather than establishing the OSCE’s influence over European security affairs. Accordingly, Russia wanted to focus on the politico-military dimension, insisting that, with NATO’s expansion, that is the area in which most violations of the OSCE’s principles were happening. The West, by contrast, claimed that European security was threatened the most in the economic, ecological, and human dimensions by certain OSCE states refusing to adhere to democratic governance and human rights. The Corfu Process ended at the 2010 Astana Summit with a short declaration. Despite evoking the ambitious concept of a security community, it delivered little by way of moving the OSCE forward. The Czech Republic went so far as to assert in its interpretative statement accompanying the declaration that: “This opportunity was lost. So was the relevance of the OSCE” (Astana Commemorative Declaration 2010).

Following the Astana summit, the concept of a security community lingered in discourse as an aspirational ideal to commemorate 40 years since the Helsinki Final Act. Nonetheless, it was widely acknowledged among observers and practitioners that the Organization was moving in the opposite direction. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent military engagements in Donbas made this glaringly apparent. While the OSCE’s Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) was, for a while, seen as the Organization’s success, it could not make up for the severely eroded trust and confidence among its participants and the absence of genuine dialogue that would honor the idea of comprehensive, cooperative, and indivisible security.

This overview of the OSCE’s recent history shows that the Organization has had a limited impact on European security in the last twenty-five years. While its field missions and democracy and human rights-promoting activities have had many triumphs, the Organization has nevertheless remained trapped, constantly reflecting dividing lines from its environment, unable to overcome them despite several initiatives. In such circumstances, the OSCE’s rich normative catalog has been used far

less for building Europe's security and much more for participating states' blame games.

If we refer back to ontological security, this long-standing weakness of the OSCE can be reinterpreted as a potential source of maladaptive resilience amid the challenges of the Ukrainian war. Arguably, the war has brought about earthshaking disruption to several domains vital for the OSCE's survival, from struggles to adopt a unified budget and select a new Chair-in-Office to effectively reducing the Human Dimension Implementation Meetings (HDIM) to a civil society event. However, such or similar damage has yet to be done to the OSCE's relationship with its environment, as reflected in the quality of the dialogue among its participating states in high-level fora. Considering that the quality of this dialogue, and consequently the OSCE's impact on European security, has been at a low level for a quarter of a century, the OSCE can continue functioning as it is accustomed. Participating states can continue with their blame games uninterrupted and may even be able to reinforce their positions. In other words, the OSCE can persist as an essentially unchanged entity in this organizational aspect. This means that the Organization possesses a certain level of maladaptive resilience, significant for analytical and practical purposes. As shown in the concluding section, this approach could point to a way the Organization could persist until conditions are met for its reinvigoration.

24.7 Conclusion

The above analysis leaves little room for optimism: the OSCE is a highly fragile international organization. On the one hand, it seems that its chances of surviving the war in Ukraine would be greater if it scored better on the formal factors of institutional resilience, such as having a more robust bureaucracy or established flows of extra-budgetary funding. On the other hand, there are reasons to believe that even if its institutional design pointed toward a more resilient IO, such a design would still not insulate it from high-flying tensions among its participating states. As we see now, even those aspects of the OSCE previously considered moderately functional, such as field operations and monitoring mechanisms, are vulnerable to the participating states' sharply diverging security interests and normative preferences. Even a strong bureaucracy would be hard-pressed to keep the Organization afloat in such circumstances without being accused of siding with one of the parties.

Therefore, if the OSCE prevails in the short term amid the war in Ukraine, it will likely do so through some form of organizational contraction. Given the OSCE's history, it seems likely that in this scenario, it would be reduced to a forum, albeit a maladaptive one. Here, the participating states would primarily air their grievances about each other's conduct, as they have in the last 25 years, rather than a forum capable of constructively affecting European security. However, while this maladaptive resilience can keep the Organization going for some time, participating states need to see value in interacting in this way. Such value might exist, for if the OSCE were allowed to collapse completely, the states would lose a forum in which they

communicate their security preferences and red lines and a shared catalog of norms upon which such preferences and red lines can be justified. In more concrete terms, for the Western states, this might mean using the OSCE to signal to Russia that it should not expect a compromise on established rules and principles. They might emphasize that they will not accept negotiations on zones of influence or any discussion of European security in similarly retrograde terms, including if Russia manages to keep parts of Ukraine under prolonged occupation.

However, for this kind of pressure on Russia to pay dividends in the war's aftermath, the Western states must also constructively engage with other OSCE participating states. It should not be overlooked that, of the OSCE's 57 participating states, 23 are neither EU nor NATO members. Although many of these states are related to the EU and NATO through various arrangements such as accession talks and the Partnership for Peace, the OSCE remains the only security arrangement that jointly connects them to the West. Most of these states are located in the Western Balkans, the Southern Caucasus, and Central Asia, regions in which Russia has long been highly influential as a factor of stability and confrontation. Loosening security ties with these regions would risk bringing them under Russia's more significant influence or create an opportunity structure for reigniting many of their long-standing conflicts. Here, one only needs to think about the futures of Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia. With all this in mind, the Western states could use even the truncated OSCE to deepen security relations with these regions through a creative combination of diplomatic co-optation, material incentives (where possible), and potentially even an invitation to contribute to the shaping of the vision of European security after the war in Ukraine.

Suppose the OSCE manages to prevail in the Ukrainian war and does so with 57 participating states willing to deepen their cooperation. In that case, its relaunch should come with well-thought-out reform, not a return to the pre-war status quo. The discussion of IO resilience above points to bureaucracy as the area to which the most attention should be paid. Accordingly, the Secretariat and the position of the Secretary-General should be strengthened and given more autonomy. The Secretary-General should have agenda-setting and certain decision-making powers *vis-à-vis* the OSCE's state-run bodies, the ODIHR, and field missions. The position should also be turned into that of an actual voice for the OSCE. Coalition building with the media, peer organizations, certain participating states, and the civil, private, and academic sectors has long been a part of the Secretary-General's repertoire in the OSCE. But with more authority and autonomy, this practice could be extended further, yielding much-needed returns such as greater organizational visibility and legitimacy and more significant epistemic and, perhaps even, material resources. However, as pointed out earlier, while institutional reform would increase the OSCE's resilience, it cannot provide a solid shield against the kind of tensions it is currently experiencing. The reform of the OSCE should therefore be thought of primarily in a preventive sense: as an insurance policy against similar strains emerging again in the future.

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