

Damian Szacawa

## **OSCE on the eve of the Polish Chairmanship: difficult cooperation in an (in)security environment**

**Tense relations between OSCE member states have always been a major obstacle to reaching the consensus necessary for foreign ministers to make decisions. The past year has been marked by Sweden's constant search for a consensus that would allow the proper functioning of the OSCE in a dynamic security environment. Despite these efforts, no progress has been made on resolving the main conflicts in the OSCE area. They constitute the most important challenge for Poland, which assumed the OSCE Chairmanship at the beginning of January 2022.**

**Outcome of Sweden's OSCE Chairmanship.** The 28<sup>th</sup> meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council was held in Stockholm on 2-3 December 2021. It was organised as part of the conclusion of Sweden's Chairmanship of the OSCE, which expired at the end of December 2021. Over the past year, Sweden has focused on three priorities: strengthening the European security order based on international law, emphasising the importance of the concept of so-called 'comprehensive security', and striving for a gradual resolution of conflicts in the OSCE's area of operation (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 252](#)).

In addition to these issues, which are traditionally in the spotlight of the OSCE, Sweden has placed emphasis on gender equality. This issue is at the heart of the Swedish feminist foreign policy (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 356](#)). The practical application of this policy in the activities of the OSCE was evident in raising the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda at the international level. Moreover, there was a symbolic dimension also visible in the change of the OSCE Chairmanship into the OSCE Chairpersonship, emphasised by Minister Ann Linde.

The security and foreign policy interests of the OSCE member states have become so diverse in previous years, that they now prevent the organisation from functioning effectively, especially with regard to activities undertaken in the politico-military and human dimensions. This trend was maintained during the Swedish Presidency. Due to the lack of consensus around whether the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict should be the subject of a separate panel during the Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC), it was postponed from June to August/September 2021. For the second consecutive year, the OSCE conference on Human Rights (Human Dimension Implementation Meetings – HDIM), usually organised in Warsaw by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), did not take place. After the cancellation of the 2020 HDIM due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this time it was Russia that was not interested in discussing the topic of 'democratic elections', and instead proposing to focus on the threat of neo-Nazism.

After all, of the 25 draft decisions proposed for adoption during the ministerial meeting – only two important decisions were adopted. The first concerns strengthening cooperation between Member States in responding to the challenges caused by climate change. As a result of the increased importance of this issue, the OSCE supports measures to ensure synergies between prevention, mitigation and adaptation to climate change. It draws attention to the need to implement the agreements adopted under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and to cooperate with other international organisations in this area. The adopted decision also allows for greater involvement of the Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) in assisting the Member States.

Reaching a consensus also allowed the adoption of a common position of the OSCE Member States towards supporting the negotiation process in the 5+2 format between Moldova and Transnistria, in which the US, EU, OSCE, Russia and Ukraine act as mediators. The continued commitment of all participants in the 5+2 format to

a comprehensive settlement agreement was stressed. It should be based on the OSCE principles, preserving Moldova's sovereignty and its territorial integrity, while granting a special status to Transnistria, which will guarantee full rights to the population.

In addition, the OSCE Member States entrusted Finland with the OSCE Chairmanship in the jubilee year of 2025, when the organisation will celebrate its 50th anniversary. At the same time, it was not possible to agree on which state will take over the chairmanship in 2024 (North Macedonia will take over after Poland's Chairmanship ends at the end of December 2022). Estonia's candidacy was opposed by Belarus and Russia.

**Challenges facing Poland's OSCE Chairmanship.** The change in the OSCE Chairmanship not only provides an opportunity to summarise, but also to identify the main challenges for the future. Last year, Sweden's numerous attempts to find consensus were doomed to failure due to the global geopolitical situation, dominated by great power competition (the US, Russia and China). This affects existing regional conflicts, which are still unresolved. They have not been mitigated by the numerous official visits by Minister Linde, who has visited all the OSCE field operations. The protracted deadlock regarding their settlement prevents the achievement of stability on the European continent, which is currently the greatest challenge for both the Organisation itself and Poland's Chairmanship.

Firstly, the conflict in eastern Ukraine is more than seven years old, and the Minsk agreements are not being implemented. The situation is complicated by the fact that the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (SMM) very often encounters restrictions preventing the free movement of observers or creating other obstacles to the fulfilment of the mission's mandate. In addition, just before the OSCE Ministerial Council meeting, the NATO Secretary General reported Russian troop military drills, and build-ups on the Ukrainian border (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 472](#)).

Secondly, widespread human rights violations by government security forces continue in Belarus. These affect both the opposition and citizens participating in peaceful protests following the August 2020 presidential elections (["IEŚ Commentaries", no. 4](#)). At the request of seventeen OSCE participating States, the emergency instrument to investigate serious violations of the Human Dimension (Moscow Mechanism) was applied in November 2020, and confirmed that the elections had been rigged. Belarus did not accept the report's recommendations, complying with Sweden's earlier proposal that the OSCE could play a mediating role in the conflict between President Aleksandr Lukashenko and the opposition. Moreover, the declaration of openness to dialogue contained in response by Belarus to the Vienna Mechanism, implemented on 4 November 2021 at the initiative of 35 OSCE states, is not reflected in the actions or behaviour of the Belarusian authorities.

Thirdly, the old conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in the context of the Azerbaijani troops' offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh in September-November 2020, negatively affected the OSCE negotiations. As a consequence, almost every OSCE decision, even not directly related to the Nagorno-Karabakh area, was contested by one side or the other, leading to the blocking of important decisions, such as the extension of the SMM mandate by one year (finally adopted on the last possible day, i.e. 31 March 2021), or the adoption of the OSCE annual budget. It was adopted only on 18 August 2021, and as a consequence – from April 2021 the organisation was operating on the basis of temporary monthly allocations, which significantly hindered the implementation of projects. The late adoption of the budget was mainly due to the reservations of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia objected to increasing the budget for ODIHR election observation missions. On the other hand, the Caucasian states opposed some of the future programmatic activities planned within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Process, whose main task is to find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict acceptable to all parties.

**Conclusions.** The OSCE, due to the adopted system of consensus decision-making, is an example of an international organisation whose effectiveness results directly from the existence of consensus among all the member states. Due to the numerous conflicts between the OSCE Member States, many decisions are not adopted or are delayed. As a result, no solutions have been found for any of the security challenges in the OSCE area that existed when Sweden assumed the Chairmanship in January 2021.

This is all the more important as the decisions adopted at the Ministerial Council are crucial for the functioning of the organisation in the months ahead, as they form the basis for the activities of the OSCE's executive structures. In the past, this has enabled the OSCE to function effectively in all three dimensions of security: the politico-military, the economic and environmental and the human dimension. It has enabled the OSCE to be active in many areas, including arms control, combating human trafficking, preventing corruption and increasing the safety of journalists.

In connection with even more frequent instances of blocking key events, delaying decisions on the annual budget or failing to fill key positions in the OSCE's executive bodies occurring in the second half of 2020, the risk of the OSCE becoming a dysfunctional organisation is growing. Next to the ongoing conflicts in the OSCE area, this represents the biggest challenge both for Poland's Chairmanship, which began on 1 January 2022, and for the subsequent years of the OSCE. All this also means that the OSCE is a hostage to the deteriorating international situation.