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editorial

Since the conflict in Ukraine, many people have been talking about the return of the Cold War. Relations between the East and the West have become entrenched. At the same time, new priorities are cropping up on the OSCE’s agenda, such as migration and terrorism. In the midst of it all is civil society.

Is it suffering the effects of a so-called “shrinking space,” – in other words, the restriction of its freedom to act? Can civil society have an impact on frozen conflicts? How can it cooperate meaningfully with governments and the OSCE? These questions are at the heart of this issue of à propos. The magazine features a range of contributions from key figures and experts concerned with the OSCE, and from organizations and Swiss administrative authorities working in the region.

I hope you enjoy reading it.

Amélie Lustenberger, Editor of KOFF Magazine

PS: The KOFF Annual Report 2017 is all about art, women, and human rights in peacebuilding. Read the report here.
focus

No civil society, no peace and security

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is the world’s largest regional security organization with 57 participating States and a population of more than one billion people – all the way from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The original raison d’être of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (known as the OSCE from 1994) was to serve as a dialogue platform between West and East during the Cold War, leading to the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. The ten Helsinki Principles represented a compromise between Western and Eastern interests at the time, most importantly recognizing the universal significance of human rights and fundamental freedoms as a prerequisite for peace and security as well as recognizing the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of states. Since Italy took over the OSCE Chairmanship in January 2018, the original raison d’être of the OSCE has somewhat been broadened. According to the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Italy’s Foreign Minister Angelino Alfano, the OSCE should increasingly also be used as a bridge builder in the Mediterranean region (between North and South) – a region complementing (rather than an alternative to) the Eurasian dimension, in particular in the light of questions concerning migration, extremism and terrorism.

Civil society challenges on the OSCE multilateral level

In the past four decades, civil society groups have played a crucial role in documenting, monitoring and reporting on the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act and its corresponding OSCE commitments. Civil society information has played a vital role in early
warning, conflict prevention and transformation as well as post-conflict rehabilitation.

The current modalities for civil society participation in OSCE events grant NGO representatives the right to participate and provide input on an equal footing with government representatives at OSCE Human Dimension review conferences, implementation meetings and seminars on the condition that they register with the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). These modalities, however, are currently at stake as some OSCE participating States seek to introduce new rules and procedures to limit civil society participation. Governments would thus receive the right to approve (and thereby block) the participation of critical and independent civil society voices, for example, because their organizations are not registered at the national level, they are considered to lack “relevant” expertise or they are accused of supporting “extremism” or “terrorism”. Introducing such “vetting” measures to shrink civil society space on the OSCE multilateral level, only mirrors what has been happening on the ground in many participating States in the past years.

Civil society challenges in the OSCE region

The following overview of civil society challenges in the OSCE region is based on information and documents of the OSCE-wide NGO-network “Civic Solidarity Platform”:

The continued security and human rights crises in/around Ukraine as well as other protracted conflict contexts remain a priority concern. Civil society actors remain determined to contribute to conflict transformation as well as post-conflict rehabilitation, and provide early-warning signs for the sake of preventing the outbreak of new conflicts.

Increasing restrictions on freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression, as well as growing security threats to civil society actors, their freedom of movement and the right to fair trial, have led to a significant shrinking of civil society space across the OSCE region. Such restrictions are often justified under the pretext of protecting state sovereignty, national security, preventing “foreign interference in domestic affairs”, the “fight against extremism and terrorism” as well as the protection of “traditional values”.

Freedom of expression has regressed in many OSCE participating States and disinformation has become a worrisome phenomenon, often targeting migrants, refugees, LGBTI persons, human rights defenders and women. Many OSCE participating States are not taking adequate steps to prevent, investigate, prosecute or punish the threats and abuses, and in too many cases are themselves complicit.

A number of countries in the OSCE region are facing threats to their constitutional setup. Several constitutional referendums have resulted in a worrying increase in executive power as well as weakened checks and balances. These constitutional crises reflect threats to the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and democracy itself.

Far-right and populist parties are gaining political power across the OSCE region, many basing their rhetoric on national sovereignty, security and traditional values over individual rights and against perceived “outsiders” such as refugees fleeing violence. There is a clear increase in anti-refugee sentiments, xenophobia and hate speech.
Terrorist attacks led several governments to adopt tougher counter-terrorism legislation marking a shift towards a harder security line, at the expense of individual freedoms. Many counter-terrorism laws leave room for misinterpretation and misuse for the targeting of minorities, opposition figures and critical civil society voices. Other legislation violates the privacy and security of individuals by expanding state surveillance powers, and exceptional powers and temporary measures such as the “state of emergency” risk becoming the new normal.

The increase in the use or promotion of torture and enforced disappearances in OSCE participating States is alarming. Persecution of perpetrators are shamefully low, which illustrates the systematic nature of torture and enforced disappearances in many countries.

Back to the Future

The problem of shrinking civil society space is jeopardizing the effectiveness, credibility and very raison d’être of the OSCE at a time when civil society actors, more than ever, need OSCE forums to make their voices heard. The inability of civil society to operate effectively will not only undermine democratic public participation, but the very ability of the OSCE to work effectively, since a lot of vital information from the ground and pioneering ideas on how to address gaps in the implementation of OSCE commitments come from civil society. The recent attempts by some OSCE participating States to restrict civil society participation run counter to these objectives and can be considered early warning signs of threats to peace and stability in the OSCE region. The participation of civil society actors, who address crosscutting issues of human security, is a key element of the organization’s comprehensive and inclusive security agenda and a precondition for the success of conflict prevention, democratization and peacebuilding processes in the long term.

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links
- Civic Solidarity Platform
- OSCE Fact sheet
- CSP statement – Safeguarding civil society participation in the Helsinki process - a matter of the OSCE’s raison d’être
- Outcome documents of the OSCE Parallel Civil Society Conference, Hamburg, 6-7 December 2016
- Civil society recommendations to the participants of the OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting in Vienna (December 2017)
- Vienna Declaration on Preventing Security Measures from Eclipsing Human Rights

reports
No quick fix for conflicts in the OSCE area – an interview with Christoph Lanz

Christoph Lanz is President of the Swiss Helsinki Committee (SHV), a civil society organization working to promote democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in Switzerland and abroad. The SHV is linked to numerous Helsinki committees from other OSCE states via the Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP). In the interview, he explains why the OSCE has become more important in recent years, and tells us about the impact NGOs can have in the region.

The SHV’s work includes a project for young people in the Western Balkans, which aims to bring them together and encourage contact between them. Could you tell us more about it?

The SHV has been holding seminars in Switzerland and the Western Balkans since 2007. At these seminars, students discuss democratic rights, freedom of the press, conflict resolution, and dealing with the past. The SHV extended the project to schoolchildren with the “Challenge History” summer school, which was held for the first time in Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) in July 2017. Around 20 young people from three countries participated in discussions and activities (led by experts) on the history of the Western Balkans. Fun elements were included; for instance, the pupils acted out the court proceedings that followed the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in 1914. Half the group portrayed the
defense and the others played the prosecution. This helped the pupils to view the situation from both points of view. History lessons in the Western Balkans are often heavily influenced by nationalism. This project is intended to offer pupils a more open-minded perspective. It was also lovely to see that the participants made friends and did activities together outside of classes, too.

What other projects does the SHV have planned?

The first summer school was a huge success, so we want to hold it again – this year in Kosovo, and next year in Serbia. Unfortunately, we’re unable to organize any more international projects due to a lack of resources. But the SHV does play a significant role in historical and political education within Switzerland. We visit schools and speak to pupils about the challenges facing the OSCE, the commitments of member states, civil liberties, democracy, and the rule of law. We’re aiming to make these visits more intensive and professional. The SHV also invites everyone to attend its annual meeting on August 24. Thomas Greminger, Secretary General of the OSCE, will give a talk about the challenges currently facing the organization.

You spoke about a lack of resources, which brings us right to our next question: what challenges do you think the SHV is currently facing?

We can’t hold the summer school without working closely with local NGOs. This isn’t always straightforward because of geographical distance, language barriers, and differences in experience. It’s also difficult to find sponsors for projects like that.

We often hear that civil society’s freedom to act has become increasingly restricted in recent years. Has this affected the SHV, too?

It doesn’t impede our work in the Western Balkans, probably because a summer school poses very little threat to the states, whereas other NGOs present a direct challenge to governments with their work. We are indirectly affected by growing distrust between the states, which leads to more bureaucratic barriers. In order to obtain a visa for Mostar, for example, pupils from Kosovo had to travel to Macedonia with their parents beforehand.

Other organizations – including some from the CSP – also tell us that they are struggling to operate in the “shrinking space” of civil society. Lots of human rights activists and NGOs are subjected to serious harassment and even persecution. The situation is particularly precarious in Russia, Turkey, and some central Asian nations. Of course, it pains us to see our sister organizations come under that kind of pressure.

Is there a link between the suppression of human rights activists and the conflicts in the OSCE area?
The rise in the oppressive treatment of human rights activists is a result of the increasingly authoritarian and nationalistic governments in the region. Countries that have hostile relations with other countries usually oppress minorities within their borders, and suppress anything that stands in opposition to their actions. These countries promote a nationalist mindset, which is just a small step away from restricting human rights. The conflicts in Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are good examples of this.

You mentioned the conflict in Ukraine. What kind of impact can NGOs have in such “frozen conflicts”?

NGOs are very active in conflict zones in the OSCE area, even if they are under immense pressure at the time. For instance, they work to defend individual human rights activists who have been imprisoned or are in some other danger. They have been repeatedly successful in this area. They put pressure on governments using petitions, applications, and appeals, which are exchanged between NGOs, including those within the CSP.

Since the conflict in Ukraine, many people are talking about the return of the Cold War. Do you agree with this assessment?

The conflict in Ukraine has caused tensions between Russia and western countries to escalate, and has complicated cooperative work within the OSCE. At the same time, however, the OSCE has also gained importance because of the conflict. Soon after it began, the OSCE dispatched a special mission (SMM) to the Ukraine, which deescalated the situation at the borders of critical regions. Although the SMM cannot intervene directly, its mere presence and its work observing and reporting incidents have a positive impact. This special mission operates in a similar way to the UN’s Blue Helmets. What’s more, the OSCE oversees negotiations between the conflicting parties, which have already led to several temporary ceasefires. This has made life at least slightly easier for the people affected by the conflict, for example, by repairing destroyed water pipes. It’s therefore fair to say that the OSCE fulfills its role as a mediator between East and West in this crisis.

Switzerland held the OSCE chairmanship in 2014. How did this affect SHV and the OSCE?

In 2014 and 2015, the SHV were able to work very intensively with the FDFA, and we were also involved in a working group of Swiss NGOs. The chairmanship was definitely an overall success for Switzerland. It was the first country to understand that the chairmanship carries a responsibility to evaluate the human rights situation within its own borders. This set a trend which has since continued. Switzerland’s commitment also definitely influenced the decision to appoint Thomas Greminger, a Swiss man, OSCE Secretary General.

OSCE chairmanship is currently held by Italy, which is focusing on migration and terrorism. What role do NGOs play within these key areas?

Many NGOs were already involved in refugee relief prior to Italy’s chairmanship. In terms of counter-terrorism, NGOs’ work focuses on preventing the abuse of counter-terrorism measures. There are some countries that use the “fight against terror” to suppress human rights activists and other critical voices. Many NGOs are taking measures to prevent this.
The CSP drew up the “Vienna Declaration” on this subject in December 2017, which demands that security measures designed to combat terrorism are not misused to restrict human rights.

What do you think the future holds for the OSCE?

I don’t think there’s a quick fix for the conflicts in the OSCE area, but the OSCE will continue to play an essential role in preventing further escalation of conflicts and easing the plight of the people affected by them.

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links
- Swiss Helsinki Committee (in German)

reports

A new instrument for human rights: OSCE chairmanship self-evaluation
When Switzerland held the OSCE chairmanship in 2014, it took a pioneering step by evaluating its own implementation of OSCE commitments in the so-called “human dimension” (human rights and democracy). This idea actually came from civil society, specifically the Civic Solidarity Platform. The self-evaluation enables the chairing country, which changes annually, to lead by example. In a time of harsher politics and precarious human rights situations, it has become almost impossible to draw up any new human rights commitments for OSCE states. Switzerland therefore highlighted the importance of implementing existing commitments.

The country commissioned the self-evaluation to the Swiss Centre of Expertise in Human Rights (SCHR), rather than carrying it out itself. The SCHR carried out investigations in the following key areas in Switzerland:

- Election monitoring
- Intolerance: hate crimes and intolerance
- Freedom of expression
- Human trafficking
- Gender equality

Major shortcomings came to light, relating to non-transparent political finance, the restrictive way (as measured by OSCE standards) in which the right to demonstrate is governed in many cantons, and the well-known gender inequality. These and other gaps in Switzerland’s protection of human rights were also highlighted in a critical NGO report. This report has become an integral part of the evaluations, along with statements from the state administration. However, the government did not arrange a follow-up process for the self-evaluation, or at least anything that could be called that. In addressing its own human rights situation, Switzerland was a pioneer in form but not substance.

The Chairmanship was held by Serbia in 2015, Germany in 2016, Austria in 2017, and is currently held by Italy, and each country took up the mantle and carried out their own evaluations. Thanks to constant lobbying by human rights organizations in the respective countries and within the OSCE, the evaluation format is continuously being discussed and changed. A lot of potential still lies in combining different human rights processes, cooperating more intensively with OSCE’s active human rights division ODIHR, and developing a mandatory implementation process.

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links
- Civic Solidarity Platform
- SKMR: OSZE-Selbstevaluation der Schweiz (in German)
- FDFA: OSCE self-evaluation Switzerland 2014
- Serbia’s self-evaluation, 2015
- Serbia’s NGO report, 2015
Broad support leads to acceptance

In their civic education class, pupils learn about what a country needs for its people to co-exist peacefully. Photo: Pestalozzi Children's Foundation/Peter Käser

Inter-ethnic school activities and improved teaching methods are the central focus of the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation's efforts to promote mutual understanding within civil society in Macedonia.

In Macedonia, children from different ethnic groups live in separate worlds. The division appears in communities where people live in different areas depending on their culture, and is then reflected in the education system, as children from different ethnic groups attend different schools.
Since 2012, the Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation and a local organization called the Macedonian Civic Education Center (MCEC) have been working together, and in close collaboration with the Ministry of Education, to help to promote inter-cultural education in schools and communities and on a national level. “At first, it wasn’t easy to persuade schools and teachers to take on the additional workload to enable mixed classes,” says country representative Azbija Memedova, “The Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation and its work have gained a lot more trust since then.”

This is not least due to the fact that they have approached the task of integrating inter-cultural education from many different angles. Of course, the project focuses on bringing pupils together and training teachers, but it involves every affected party, from the school council to the parents. At an institutional level, the project helps to integrate inter-cultural education into internal school policies. Working with the Ministry of Education, the Foundation is revising the civic education syllabus and integrating relevant inter-cultural themes.

More than 4,000 pupils in 27 primary schools across Macedonia currently benefit from the mixed school activities. 635 teachers are attending specialized training courses to improve their methods. By the end of 2019, the project is set to have reached more than 12,000 children and young people and 800 teachers.

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links
- Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation (in German)
- Macedonian Civic Education Center

reports
Through the eyes of the OSCE: the role of civil society in mediation processes
As an inclusive platform for dialogue, the OSCE aims to facilitate the peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes by making use of its comprehensive conflict cycle toolbox, which includes dialogue facilitation and mediation. To this end, strengthening capacities to address root causes of instability and promote peaceful societies that are resilient to violent conflict is at the heart of the OSCE’s work. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) are important partners for the OSCE as they can provide early warning on rising tensions, facilitate dialogue to resolve disputes at the earliest possible stages, contribute to reconciliation processes through grassroots engagement, and strengthen peaceful and tolerant societies. CSOs also play a critical role in ensuring the meaningful inclusion of women in preventing and resolving conflicts as well as in longer-term peacebuilding efforts. CSOs provide important platforms that help empower women and make their voices heard.

Moreover, civil society can make important contributions to OSCE-led peace processes, such as the Transdniestrian Settlement Process. Accordingly, CSOs can help foster the legitimacy of such processes, promote trust between communities on different sides of the conflict divide, and broaden participation by ensuring that the issues affecting different segments of society are fed into the negotiations—thus rendering the eventual implementation of agreed solutions more comprehensive and more durable.
Nonetheless, engaging with CSOs has to be done in a context-specific and conflict-sensitive manner. In the same vein, collaboration with CSOs should not be seen as a cure for all ills. For example, in public discourse, CSOs are often perceived as pro-peace. This tends to overlook the fact that some CSOs have strong affiliations with conflict parties and are, therefore, often part of the problem rather than the solution. This seems particularly true in conflict-affected societies. In such circumstances, CSOs can act as proxies of the conflict parties, thus increasing the representation of a particular set of interests at the table. This has serious ramifications for the legitimacy of such CSOs and will hamper their involvement in official formats.

Furthermore, CSOs are often very fragmented and divided on the issues they consider important. This is another challenge for their inclusion in peace processes. There are many examples of peace initiatives that brought civil society representatives in without first providing them the space to consolidate their positions and demands. As a result, they constituted a highly divided group that could be easily manipulated or instrumentalized by the conflict parties. Including CSOs in such a manner counteracts the rationale for including them in the first place.

When the OSCE engages with CSOs for the purpose of conflict prevention and resolution, these challenges have to be addressed. Collaboration must focus on those CSOs that genuinely share the OSCE’s commitments and principles. In turn, like-minded CSOs should build strategic alliances that allow them to co-ordinate, thereby increasing their ability to be heard and positively affect conflict resolution processes. Factoring such considerations into OSCE-led mediation processes through careful process design helps to create a solid framework for the peaceful resolution of conflicts and disputes.

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links
- OSCE official website
- Book: Understanding the Mediator: Taking Stock of the OSCE’s Mechanisms and Instruments for Conflict Resolution

reports
Gender-based violence and conflict transformation
In cfd’s Ndal – Stopp project, young people prepare short theater performances on the subject of gender-based violence. At these performances, the audience discusses how to change and improve scenes to make them non-violent. The project therefore uses theater to bring about social change. Photo: Majlinda Hoxha

More than 20 years after the war, gender-based violence is still rife in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Studies show that one in four women in Bosnia and Herzegovina experiences violence. In most cases (71.5%), the perpetrators are partners or ex-partners.

In Kosovo, one third of the population believes that physical violence is part of married life, and that domestic abuse is a private family matter that should not be reported to the police. Approximately 41% of women experienced domestic violence in 2014, and 68% of women are subjected to violence in their lifetimes. Poverty is a major factor that can lead to domestic abuse. Sexual abuse is also very common in Kosovo.

Both Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo signed the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security and drew up national action plans for implementing it (NAP 1325). Civil society organizations are critically monitoring this implementation. Another important measure against domestic abuse is the Istanbul Convention, which is more specific and binding. The initial implementation strategies have been in place in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2015. In Kosovo, too, the Istanbul Convention is regarded as an essential tool to combat all forms of violence against women. Unfortunately, in both countries there is a large gap between establishing policies and implementing them in everyday life.

Gender-based violence project focus

cfd projects are strongly focused on the key themes of participation, sensitization, protection, and prevention of gender-based violence. The “Snaga – Stärke” ("power") project in Bosnia and Herzegovina provides a women’s shelter and a counseling center where women affected by violence can receive psychological counseling and support. cfd’s partner organization Medica Zenica maintains active links with the police and other
authorities to provide better protection for those affected by domestic and gender-based violence. Training courses and psychosocial support bases in villages help women to find work and escape poverty. Women are able to use their skills and unlock their potential to become more visible in the community, which in turn breaks down stereotypical gender roles and reduces gender-based violence and discrimination.

The Ndal – Stopp (“stop”) project in Kosovo helps women who have been subjected to violence to work through their experiences using theater. Young people use creative processes to actively address issues of violence and stereotypical gender roles. Young participants present public theater performances and hold discussions afterwards, alerting communities to the problem of gender-based violence.

Integration and participation

The cfd projects in south eastern Europe make it clear that they are open to participants of all ethnicities. The Ndal – Stopp and Snaga – Stärke projects deliberately bring together women and young people of different ethnicities, from both rural and urban areas. This sets an important precedent that, although on a small scale, is essential for the entire community, and for cohesion in both countries.

The objective of cfd projects is to generally improve psychological well-being and resilience. They encourage women to get involved in politics at a local level as an introduction to more political participation. The involvement of civil society is all the more important as both countries are in a fragile, post-war state, or rather on their way to becoming failed states. cfd projects help women and young people to play an active role in combating violence and discrimination. The participatory projects offer them a new perspective. This integrated approach means they can make an important contribution towards conflict transformation and peacebuilding.

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links
- Cfd – The Feminist Peace Organisation
- Kosovo Women’s Netzwork KWN
- Framework Strategy for the implementation of the convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

reports
Increased dialog with civil society

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) is a pioneering, modern and comprehensive security organization. Dissident groups have played a key role since 1975, and now in the 21st century, it has been scientifically proven that increasing the involvement of civil society helps to achieve lasting peace. At the same time, advocates of civil society in many authoritarian states are fighting an uphill battle as their contribution is often restricted by the law.

In the OSCE, civil society has always been effectively involved in the “human dimension”, but is still not adequately integrated in political, military, or economic matters. During Switzerland’s OSCE chairmanship in 2014, the country increased dialog with civil society, and should take pride in the result: from the voluntary self-evaluation of its human rights obligations, to its encouragement of political involvement among young people. Effective involvement of civil society and community-based policies are essential for tackling challenges within the OSCE area, such as radical Islamic terrorism or the effects of human migration.

The Civic Solidarity Platform (CSP) has given civil society a powerful voice within the OSCE area since 2010, which has been used every subsequent year to issue direct recommendations to OSCE member states at the OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting held in parallel with the OSCE Ministerial Council meetings. More than 80 research institutes in over 40 countries have also been contributing innovative ideas within the OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions since 2013, bridging the gap between
Increased dialog with civil society encourages discussion and promotes trust within the OSCE area, and is therefore vital for securing peace and stability in Europe in this time of multiple crises and new challenges. The inclusive, consensus-based OSCE forms the perfect link between politics, science, and civil society.

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links
- OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions
- Civic Solidarity Platform

reports

Mediating in entrenched but acute conflicts in the South Caucasus
Georgia and Azerbaijan are two different examples of how post-Soviet independence conflicts can throw a pan-European security architecture out of balance. Unresolved local conflicts indeed have the potential to block efforts to create a peace order in Europe.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, the South Caucasus has been characterized by unresolved conflicts, such as those involving Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Armenia and Azerbaijan (Nagorno-Karabakh). Although these conflicts both have their roots in Stalinist nationalities policy, they clearly differ from each other in structure, intensity and possible approaches to resolving them.

In Georgia, the conflict concerns the secession of the two regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both have been under the protection – or from the Georgian perspective, under the occupation – of Russian troops since the wars of 1992 to 1994 and 2008. Georgia condemns the Russian occupation and recognition of both “states” as a violation of its territorial integrity and demands the reintegration of the regions. In this complex conflict questions about the status of the regions and therefore of a peace settlement are taboo. However, the Sarkozy Medvedev Agreement of September 2008 established the “Geneva International Discussions” as a lasting format for conflict management.

The Geneva International Discussions are moderated by a three-member body comprising representatives of the EU, the UN and me as representative of the German OSCE Chairmanship. Representatives of the Russian and Georgian as well as the Abkhazian and South Ossetian sides also take part, although the latter are not recognized by Georgia as parties to the conflict. The Geneva International Discussions, which managed to complete 35 rounds by March 2016, convene every three months in two working groups to examine security and humanitarian issues. Some are highly controversial and provoke emotional responses, for example the return of displaced people or the freedom of travel for Abkhazians. Walkouts, where a delegation leaves the room for example as a result of a disagreement on fundamental procedural matters, are not uncommon. At the technical level, however, agreements have been regularly reached, for example on questions concerning irrigation or the protection of cultural property.

Together with the EU Monitoring Mission, I also moderate the “Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism”, known as the IPRM, where the Russian, South Ossetian and Georgian delegations meet once a month in an OSCE tent near a closed border crossing in Ergneti. So far almost 70 such meetings, lasting several hours, have taken place there. A telephone hotline is also available and is frequently used. The discussions are often about illegal crossings of the “administrative boundary line”. It is the local population who suffer most from the conflict. Time and again we wrestle over finding ways, for example to allow farmers to recover cows that have strayed across the boundary line without the risk of arrest. The issue of people who went missing during the civil war is especially tragic. The International Committee of the Red Cross deals with this aspect.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in its current form
also dates back to the independence aspirations of the former Soviet republics. Nagorno-Karabakh, which translated literally means mountain black garden, is populated mostly by Armenians, and declared independence from Azerbaijan following a military conflict in 1992. Clashes along the “line of contact” continue to this day. In May the situation seemed quiet, which does not mean that it was stable. Since the unexpected escalation from 2 to 5 April and the ceasefire that was verbally agreed in Moscow between the conflicting parties, there have been daily violations. The conflict flared up again on 28 and 29 April; the readiness of troops on both sides to fight is alarming.

The regular OSCE monitoring by Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk, the personal adviser of the OSCE Chairperson -in- Office for the Minsk Group, has a confidence-building effect. I was able to witness this myself during a monitoring visit in early May in which the German OSCE Chairperson -in- Office took part. Nevertheless, the OSCE monitoring mechanism is and remains a symbolic instrument. An effective OSCE mechanism would have to be part of a reinforced ceasefire agreement that combines monitoring with a fact-finding mechanism.

Azerbaijan would only accept such a concept, however, if Armenia were to withdraw its troops from the seven districts bordering Karabakh. Armenia, for its part, insists on establishing the status of Karabakh before it is prepared to make compromises in other areas. Following the war in April, the two sides and Nagorno-Karabakh now seem to be even further from a compromise than before; positions that have become entrenched over the past twenty years have hardened further. Scope for peace negotiations has become very limited. But time is running out, as major hostilities can break out at any time, all the more so as not only frustrations but also fears and fatigue are on the rise among the affected populations.

A solution is unimaginable in Georgia in the foreseeable future. Against this backdrop the Geneva format is helping to stabilize the militarily frozen situation in the region. By contrast, in Nagorno Karabakh all six components for a lasting peace are on the table, but no format for negotiations has been accepted that would integrate these principles within a structured process in a peace agreement. Instead clashes are constantly breaking out along the line of contact. Georgia and Azerbaijan are two different examples of how post-Soviet independence conflicts can throw a pan-European security architecture out of balance.

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links
- Crisis in Europe’s security architecture (edition 2/2016 Swiss Peace Supporter Journal, pages 14-16)
- Current issues of the Swiss Peace Supporter Journal
Using dialog to generate ideas and foster understanding

The Ukrainian people disagree with their government about the resolution strategies and temporary measures concerning the conflict in eastern Ukraine, which began over four years ago. What approach should be taken with regard to Ukrainian citizens living outside the areas under central government control? There is little support for the constructive measures aimed at keeping these people involved in Ukraine’s political system – in fact, in some cases they have been rejected outright. There is also a widespread sense of antipathy towards the peace agreements signed in Minsk. Most people see the laws and constitutional amendments laid down in those agreements that relate to decentralization, special status, local electoral law, and amnesty law as a surrender carried out on Russia’s terms. Pressure from the public is making it increasingly difficult for elected representatives in Parliament to work towards constructive solutions.

In order to create scope and understanding for constructive debates and discussions – about the best way to handle the conflict in eastern Ukraine, for example, – the FDFA’s Human Security Division is promoting a public dialog platform, where members of Parliament and the government, and experts from civil society regularly discuss possible ways of resolving the conflict peacefully. These discussions also involve experts on other conflicts (including Northern Ireland, Transnistria, and Georgia), allowing the group to share experiences and generate new ideas. Since the start of the year, the following issues have been covered: peacekeeping, international transitional administrations, and possible courses of action for government bodies and civil society with regard to the reintegration of eastern Ukraine.

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in depth

From the “honeymoon phase” to calling it a “vulgar instrument” – how Russia’s
relationship with the OSCE has changed

When the OSCE is talked about these days, it is often in connection with Russia and its role in the Ukraine conflict. People often overlook the history behind the relationship between Russia and the OSCE. Wolfgang Zellner and Elena Kropatcheva have taken a closer look at the changing relations between Russia and the OSCE. In 2005, Zellner wrote an article entitled “Russia and the OSCE: From High Hopes to Disillusionment”, while Kropatcheva wrote “The Evolution of Russia's OSCE Policy: From the Promises of the Helsinki Final Act to the Ukrainian Crisis” in 2015. How do these writers believe this development come about, and what changed between 2005 and 2015?

Up until the turn of the millennium, Russia viewed the OSCE in a largely positive light. Kropatcheva describes this period as a brief “honeymoon phase”, while Zellner calls it Russia's “positive interest” in the OSCE. Both write that it was Russia at the beginning of the 1990s that began to push for the OSCE to become a treaty-based international organization that would be legally binding and enforceable, and would include a decisive executive board, similar to the UN Security Council. According to both Zellner and Kropatcheva, there was a range of reasons behind this move. For instance, it was in the interests of the former Soviet Union to maintain acceptance of the political status quo in Europe, boost trade with European countries, and gain access to Western technology. The prospect of the eastward expansion of NATO was another key motive for Russia's actions.

However, the hope for such a treaty-based organization was soon replaced by disillusion. Numerous conflicts of interest led to a change in Russia’s OSCE policy. For this, too, both authors identify NATO's role as a pivotal factor. For example, the Kosovo Verification Mission (KVM), which was sent by the OSCE with Russia's agreement broke down in 1999, and gave way to a military strike by NATO. After that, Russia's attitude towards the OSCE changed significantly. Zellner writes that the OSCE no longer appeared to offer the chance to establish a common European security policy, but was regarded instead as a tool used by NATO. Both authors also identify other factors that led to Russia's policy change, detailing, for instance, Russia's belief that the OSCE did not adequately protect the Russian-speaking minority in European countries, the perceived moral double standard with regard to OSCE's work (according to Russia, the organization concentrated the majority of its work on post-Soviet nations), and the neglect of the political-military and economic dimensions at the expense of the human dimension.

Zellner concludes Russia viewed the OSCE as an “agent of change” in 2005. While Russia failed to defend its interests and maintain its influence, the West gained influence at Russia's expense. In light of this conflict of interests, Zellner believes there is only one way for the OSCE to go on: Russia needs to recognize that cooperating with the West is the best way to overcome the ongoing change. The OSCE could provide just the right conditions for this to happen, but only if the organization itself changes. He writes that it must move its focus away from political symbolism, and become an organization that is concerned with transnational risks and threats. If this transition is not successful, he believes the OSCE will become a marginalized organization, and will remain a “stand-by” resource that can
only be used in the event of a conflict.

Has the OSCE made this change successfully? In light of Kropatcheva’s article the answer would appear to be ‘no’, if we look at the period between 2005 and 2015. According to the article, the divide between the OSCE and Russia was made significantly wider by the color revolutions in Georgia, the Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, the condemnation of electoral fraud in Russia, and the support provided for anti-government protests by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Kropatcheva quotes Vladimir Putin, who referred to the OSCE as a “vulgar instrument that aims to promote the foreign political interests of one group of countries”. Relations between the OSCE and Russia hit rock bottom again during the Caucasus conflict in 2008 and the Ukraine crisis in 2015.

According to Kropatcheva, it is in these very crises that the framework for identifying and preventing transnational conflicts and peacefully governing relations between member states, as proposed by Zellner, appears to have failed. On the contrary, she views the OSCE as an organization that is employed exclusively in conflicts (similar to Zellner’s description as a “stand-by” resource). In the Ukraine conflict, however, it was this very role in which the OSCE was strongest, as it is the fairest mediator between the conflicting parties, and cooperative agreements, such as dispatching the Special Monitoring Mission to the Ukraine, are only made with the OSCE.

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Communications

links
- Russia and the OSCE: From High Hopes to Disillusionment
- The Evolution of Russia’s OSCE Policy: From the Promises of the Helsinki Final Act to the Ukrainian Crisis

news
KOFF member organizations

MMS/aidsfocus.ch Conference 2018: gender-based violence – approaches and challenges at community and advocacy level

On the 2nd of May the Network Medicus Mundi Switzerland held its annual conference in
Bern on the topic of gender-based violence (GBV). We discussed root causes and tangible solutions to prevent and minimise GBV. The speakers clearly stated that a multi-sectorial approach is needed. The #MeToo movement has lifted the taboo around sexual harassment and abuse. However violence remains hidden in many countries. A broken healthcare system means that rape survivors may continue to carry the burden of rape both physically and psychologically. Fear of not being believed, or being told that what they survived does not actually amount to rape, means many survivors do not know they are entitled to access both justice and medical care. We also discussed how aid organisations themselves are not immune to sexual harassment and exploitation of their own staff. Sexual exploitation and abuse in the field of humanitarian aid and development cooperation is rooted in power imbalances related to sexism, racism, and global power structures. Besides strengthening organisational structures we need to tackle these root causes, otherwise any solutions will remain reactive and superficial.

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links
- aidsfocus.ch
- Medicus Mundi Switzerland
- #AidToo: Sexual exploitation in international cooperation

Gender roles in religion

The specialist conference on gender roles in religion held by Mission 21 on March 5, 2018 was met with great interest.

Psychologist and Islamism expert Ahmad Mansour asked why young men are becoming violent or radicalized in the name of honor. Studies have revealed similarities between such young men, for instance, they often come from a patriarchal household, lack a father figure, and have been excluded from school. Similar patterns have also reportedly been observed in right-wing extremists. The problems here are not primarily religious, but psychological. Young people are seeking stability from these attitudes, so there is a need to find other ways to engage them: prevention, family support, gender equality, and the breakdown of sexual taboos.

Islamic studies scholar Esma Isis-Arnautovic based her presentation around the themes of Islam and physicality, explaining the fundamental importance of gender neutrality, God’s immateriality, and a positive perception of human corporeality. She presented specific topics in a nuanced way, speaking about purity, menstruation, clothing, sexuality, and shame. Amira Hafner-Al Jabaji, the moderator for the Swiss TV show “Sternstunde Religion” (Religion Hour), emphasized the significant effect of non-religious factors on gender roles in cultures influenced by Islam.

The event illustrated that gender roles and the patriarchy cannot be traced back to
individual religions, but rather stem from a complex combination of cultural, economic, and historical factors. Psychologist Ahmad Mansour closed the conference with the following comments: “I’ve noticed that this debate is conducted in a very polarized and moralizing way. On one hand, religion, especially Islam, is often demonized, and portrayed as oppressive and evil. On the other, there is a naive preoccupation with ‘multiculturalism’ which downplays the more problematic religious subjects and practices.” It is important to continue to recognize and differentiate between the beneficial and harmful effects of religion on gender roles.

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news

swisspeace / KOFF
Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Civilian Peacebuilding Essentials

What impact does peacebuilding have? What are the challenges involved in working in fragile contexts? How do gender roles change during a conflict and what implications does this have? How and at what point can mediation work help to defuse conflicts? How can a society come to terms with the most serious human rights violations and infringements of international humanitarian law? How can a “war economy” be transformed into an economic system that is conducive to peace?

These questions lie at the heart of the Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Civilian Peacebuilding Essentials. This training course, which is designed to be undertaken alongside professional work, gives participants a chance to update their knowledge of selected areas of civilian peacebuilding and provides training in practical methods. The course is designed for practitioners and academics interested in bridging their own experiences with current conceptual insights and practical knowledge on civilian peacebuilding.

The CAS course will be held from September 2018 to August 2019 and is a module of the Master of Advanced Studies (MAS) in Civilian Peacebuilding offered by swisspeace and the University of Basel.

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links
- Further information
- Registration until 30 June 2018

Desk study: Peace perspectives on migration

Following the “à propos” issue on Migration and Peacebuilding, swisspeace was mandated by the Human Security Division of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs to conduct further research on the nexus between migration and peace. The resulting desk study provides an overview of the limited literature and debates on the interrelationships between conflict-induced migration and peacebuilding. Thereby, it contributes to a better understanding of the potential and limitations of the peace and migration nexus.

Current migration policies and measures tend to focus on short-term results, such as early return of forced migrants to their countries of origin. The resulting predominant perception in politics, media and society is that migration is temporary and undesired. However, the
study shows that the lack of a long-term view has implications for local, regional and international peace and stability. Thus, there is a need to deepen the understanding of the links between peacebuilding and conflict-induced migration, in order to prevent re-emergence of violent conflicts and ensure peace and stability.

On the one hand, mainstreaming migration into peacebuilding can increase the profile of peacebuilding. An in-depth knowledge of causes, drivers and dynamics of conflict-induced migration can add value to peacebuilding by enhancing its understanding of the impact of conflict-induced migration on peacebuilding processes and the [conflict] context, and vice versa, and inform peacebuilding tools and methods. On the other hand, with its holistic and conflict-sensitive perspective, peacebuilding can contribute towards improving forced migration research and practice, and creating comprehensive approaches in migration governance. Particularly with regard to preventing conflict-induced migration, and the involvement of forced migrants in peace and dealing with the past processes, peacebuilding offers a lot of potential and, therefore, constitutes a politically relevant benefit to global migration governance.

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links
- à propos on migration and peacebuilding
- The study will be published here shortly

KOFF Members Meeting 2018

On May 30, KOFF held its annual members’ meeting, where it presented its Annual Report 2017, among other things. The topic-specific part of the meeting focused on the Agenda 2030. KOFF is actively involved in the Agenda 2030 platform, a group of civil society organizations dedicated to development, peace, the environment, human rights, sustainable management, gender, and trade union activities. Members addressed the following questions: how can the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) outlined in the Agenda 2030, especially Goal 16 on peace and justice, be incorporated into Swiss administration and politics? How significant a role do SDGs play in the work of the two state-run KOFF member organizations, the HSD and the SDC, and how is the Agenda 2030 being discussed in the Swiss Parliament? What opportunities are there for civil society initiatives run by KOFF members to tie in with these processes and debates, and where are the limits?

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links
calendar

Upcoming events

March 2018 – October 2018
Geneva, Switzerland

Around the World with the Red Cross heads to Geneva
The “Destination Croix-Rouge” (Around the World with the Red Cross) exhibition, to be held at the Maison du futur in Geneva, invites you to experience a journey through disaster zones. Through this exhibition, the Red Cross aims to show the countries and people affected, and demonstrate the different ways to prevent catastrophes and reduce risks.

more information

June 5, 2018
Bern, Switzerland

Movie night – land grabbing in Cambodia
In the movie the director, Mehdi Sahebi documents the land grabbing of the plantation owners and the consequences for the local people. Following the movie there will be a discussion with the movie director.

more information

June 10, 2018
Zurich, Switzerland

Closing ceremony for the “Farbe bekennen” (“show your true colors”) campaign
With the “Farben bekennen” campaign, HEKS and more than 180 campaign partners hope to make the voice of humanity heard in Switzerland. The campaign is therefore intended as part of a constructive discussion about refugees and policies that demonstrate solidarity with asylum seekers.

more information

June 22, 2018
Basel, Switzerland

Dialog International: What’s next for South Sudan?
Civil war has raged in South Sudan since 2013. An event on this subject will be held in the Mission House in Basel as part of the “Dialog International” series. Speakers and guests will discuss the role of the church in South Sudan, and the peacebuilding potential of the
Certificate of Advanced Studies (CAS) in Civilian Peacebuilding Essentials
This course will teach you about the challenges facing mediators during peace negotiations and efforts to promote dialog. You will also be trained to develop your own negotiation and mediation skills.

more information
registration open until June 30, 2018

Dealing with the Past & Conflict Transformation Course
 Appropriately addressing the past is often a crucial step towards achieving lasting peace. This course will teach you about the challenges and potential of developing and implementing processes for coming to terms with the past.

more information
registration open until June 30, 2018

Fragility, Conflict & Statebuilding Course
 How does one deal with instability and build a state? This question is at the heart of the “Fragility, Conflict & Statebuilding” course. This course will focus on the conceptual, political and implementation-related challenges involved in establishing a state in precarious and war-torn circumstances.

more information
registration open until July 31, 2018
KOFF is a dialogue and exchange platform facilitated by swisspeace. It is jointly supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the following Swiss NGOs which are members of the platform:

- ae-Centre
- Alliance Sud
- APRED
- artsafoundation
- Baha’i
- Brücke • Le pont
- Caritas Switzerland
- Caux – Initiatives of Change Foundation
- cfd
- DCAF
- Eirene Suisse
- Fondation Hirondelle
- Grains of Peace
- Green Cross Switzerland
- Group for a Switzerland without an Army
- HEKS
- HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation
- IAMANEH Schweiz
- Interpeace
- Lucerne Initiative for Peace and Security (LIPS)
- medico international schweiz
- MIR Switzerland
- mission 21
- miva – transporte l’aide
- Peace Brigades International
- Peace Nexus Foundation
- Peace Watch Switzerland
- PeaceWomen Across the Globe
- Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation
- Quaker United Nations Office
- Schweizerischer Katholischer Frauenbund
- Society for Threatened Peoples Switzerland
- Solidar Switzerland
- SOS Children’s Villages
- Stiftung für Integrale Friedensförderung
- Swiss Academy for Development
- Swiss Catholic Lenten Fund
- Swiss Peace Council
- Swiss Red Cross
- Swiss Refugee Council
- SWISSAID
- Terre des Femmes Switzerland
terre des hommes schweiz
- Verein Palmyrah
- Women for Peace Switzerland