



## **Environmental Security and the OSCE**

Historians without Borders in Finland and Civic Solidarity Platform Workshop  
Helsinki +50 Reflection Process

Policy Recommendations to the Finnish OSCE Task Force  
November 2024

### Policy Recommendations

Finland as CiO in 2025 could:

- Create a thematic focus on civil society engagement for the second dimension to direct work in the policy area in 2025.
- Explore ways to capitalize on Central Asian and South Caucasus governments' interest in environmental cooperation, but also how to reincorporate the work of national and international NGOs operating in contexts that have become increasingly limited.
- Acknowledge civil society actors as knowledge producers in addressing environmental and climate security risks. Consider avenues to better incorporate this complementary knowledge production into OSCE decision-making structures. For example, a civil society representative at Office of the Co-ordinator of OSCE Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA) meetings or the Group of Friends on the Environment could be useful.
- Facilitate cooperation between OSCE, UN, and EU work on environmental and climate security.
- Create a public-facing platform, publication series, or social media campaign highlighting environmental defenders from around the OSCE area to both protect environmental defenders, but also promote OSCE visibility on this critical issue.

## Workshop Background

Historians without Borders in Finland, in cooperation with Civic Solidarity Platform, implemented the workshop “Environmental Security and the OSCE” on 5 November 2024 at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki. The workshop, organized as part of the OSCE by All project at Historians without Borders in Finland,<sup>i</sup> assembled over 20 experts and civil society actors from OSCE participating States including, but not limited to: Belgium, Canada, Finland, Georgia, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and the U.S. The workshop included three thematic sessions focusing on: OSCE second dimension work, the climate crisis as an intersectional challenge, and civil society and environmental justice. The workshop was held under Chatham House Rules. The contents of this report are based on discussions held during the workshop.

The participant composition and broad thematic focus helped achieve two main goals. The former supported our objective of discussing OSCE issues more comprehensively from Vancouver to Vladivostok, while the latter motivated Finnish environmental NGOs not acquainted with the OSCE to take more interest in the institution’s work in the second dimension leading up to 2025.

## Developing the OSCE Second Dimension

The workshop, as well as scientific literature, highlights that the second dimension of the OSCE is the broadest and arguably most underused basket. Work in this dimension, however, has developed over the past 20 years. This workshop highlighted that significant issues remain to be addressed in developing the second dimension as an integral piece of an OSCE comprehensive security model.

Since 2014 second dimension work has been increasingly tied to Chairperson-in-Office initiatives. In 2021, Sweden as CiO was significantly able to obtain consensus on a ministerial decision to encourage participating States to “identify, raise awareness of, mitigate and adapt to climate-related challenges.” Dialogue and cooperation were noted as necessary to minimize the economic, social, and environmental impacts of climate change.<sup>ii</sup> Additional support has come from the OSCE Group of Friends of Environment, founded in 2019 by France, Switzerland, and the UK. The aim was to strengthen cooperation on environmental issues as part of a broader effort to prevent conflicts, build mutual confidence, and promote good neighbourly relations.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite this progress, experts have chided the OSCE for a lack of a “clear thematic approach” to climate security.<sup>iv</sup> Despite focus among civil society actors themselves, little policy analysis focuses on the role of civil society in addressing environmental and climate issues. This combination would have added value within the OSCE context.

The Finnish Chairpersonship for 2025 could create a thematic focus combining the work of civil society and environment to motivate future second dimension work. Initiatives that promote environmental resilience as a key factor in societal and economic resilience could be one thematic focus. Civil societies' role in maintaining the integrity of climate data (e.g., air quality and soil quality monitoring, etc.) should also be underlined.

One of the main added values of the OSCE in a broader European security architecture is its close cooperation with civil society actors. The OSCE is sometimes criticized for being an institution of sandwiches and seminars. However, workshop participants noted that civil society seminars are one of the few remaining forums where Russian and Ukrainian participants still interact. These networks are important for regional civil society cooperation post-Ukraine War.

Secondly, the OSCE has added value as a specific form of knowledge production in addressing environmental and climate issues. This knowledge production is seen as an objective of the OSCE.<sup>v</sup> So far, this has mostly focused on research, but knowledge production in civil society should be considered significant. Workshops such as “Environmental Security and the OSCE” are one example of how to focus civil society contributions to OSCE politics in Vienna.

In pursuit of this goal, the Finnish CiO could consider avenues to better incorporate civil society actors into OSCE decision-making structures, as well as how to give appropriate feedback to civil society leaders so that they can refine their advocacy with OSCE relevant language. A rotating civil society representative at OCEEA meetings or the Group of Friends on the Environment could further connect diplomatic and civil society discussions on environment and climate.

One additional area where the OSCE would have a logical contribution is in defending environmental defenders, publicly, as well as through the OSCE’s unique form of “quiet diplomacy.” Currently, there is widespread concern that civil society work in the field of environment is increasingly dangerous. Over 2100 environmental and land defenders have been killed around the world since 2012. This does not include imprisonments and reprisals.

According to international civil society representatives, the space for environmental information data collection and tracking the impact of environmental risks and climate change on populations has significantly narrowed in the past 20 years. State harassment and imprisonment are just some of the consequences. The numerous foreign agent laws in Central Asia and the South Caucasus limit the scope of international support for civil society and environmental defenders.<sup>vi</sup>

The Finnish CiO should explore ways to maintain interest in environmental and climate security initiatives from Central Asian governments, but also how to reincorporate the work of national and international NGOs. One recommendation is to convince Central Asian and South Caucasus countries that cooperation with environmental NGOs is vital to building resilient societies.

Finland as 2025 CiO should explore ways to combine civil society and environmental issues to promote second dimension issues as part of the OSCE comprehensive security model. Promoting discussion and having liaisons between experts in each dimension would be one idea in need of more concrete solutions. A longer-term mandate like the UN Special Rapporteur should also be investigated to institutionalize OSCE support for environmental defenders in line with the Helsinki Decalogue.

In line with this recommendation and building off the idea of civil society as a unique community of knowledge production, the stories of people who suffer the most from climate change and environmental disasters need to be made visible and supported by the OSCE. Creating a public-facing platform, publication series, or social media campaign highlighting environmental defenders from around the OSCE area and their work could be a useful strategy to promote environmental security as a cross-dimensional issue. This would also promote OSCE visibility.

## Conclusions

Finland as CiO, in promoting second dimension work in 2025, needs to walk a line between defending the integrity of the Helsinki Decalogue as well as environmental defenders, and working with participating States to maintain their interest in second dimension issues. This will not be a simple task. This workshop was fruitful in thinking about not only second dimension issues, but OSCE added value overall. Motivating people from outside the second dimension in OSCE politics to take interest in environmental and economic issues will benefit the institution overall. Increased cross-basket work will develop the vitality and dynamism of OSCE discussions going forward.

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*This report represents the views of the authors and does not reflect the institutional position of Historians without Borders in Finland.*

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<sup>i</sup> For more on the OSCE by All project, see: <https://historianswithoutborders.fi/en/programs-and-projects/osce-by-all>.

<sup>ii</sup> OSCE, “Strengthening Co-operation to Address the Challenges Caused by Climate Change,” MC/Decision no. 3/21, 3 December 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> Smolnik, Franziska (2019): “Cooperation, Trust, Security? The Potential and Limits of the OSCE's Economic and Environmental Dimension,” SWP Research Paper, No. 16/2019, *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP)*, Berlin, Germany, 15.

<sup>iv</sup> Barnhoorn, Anniek (2023): “Comparing responses to Climate-Related Security Risks Among The EU, NATO and the OSCE,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri)*, Stockholm, Sweden, 15.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>vi</sup> U.S. Helsinki Commission (2024): “Contesting Russia: Preparing for the Long-Term Russia Threat: A Report by the U.S. Helsinki Commission Staff,” *U.S. Helsinki Commission*. Washington D.C., 22. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Contesting-Russia-Report-2.pdf>.