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Consensus or Collapse? Navigating the OSCE's Financial Crisis and Strengthening Regional Security Governance

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Global Challenges Foundation

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October 2026

Consensus or Collapse? Navigating the OSCE's Financial Crisis and Strengthening Regional Security Governance

Exploring the causes of the OSCE's five-year Unified Budget deadlock and lessons that could support the organization's effective operation in the future.

By Natika Kantaria

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an organization of 57 participating states, faced a five-year Unified Budget deadlock before it was resolved in March 2026. The challenges that intergovernmental organizations face are not new, and some organizations may receive more attention than others. However, these organizations play an important role in supporting states in meeting their commitments. At the same time, procedural rules written a long time ago can affect the overall operation of an organization, and the OSCE is not an exception. What lessons can be learned from the five-year impasse, and what can the OSCE take into account as it considers its future effectiveness and efficiency?

Abstract

Regional intergovernmental organizations like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) traditionally played a key role in strengthening democracy and security, yet the current global governance system faces significant financial and political instability. This policy brief addresses the critical problem of the OSCE's consensus-based budget approval procedure, which allows a single participating state to block the annual budget. Since 2021, the organization has operated without an approved budget, relying on temporary "provisional twelfths" (monthly emergency budgets) that hinder long-term planning and threaten its core functions. After five years, the budget was finally approved in March 2026, ending the OSCE's reliance on provisional twelfths, but leaving unresolved structural vulnerabilities of a consensus-based budgetary system and the possibility of similar impasse in the future.[1]

The brief highlights how political divisions have translated into institutional deadlock, demonstrating a broader challenge of consensus-based intergovernmental organizations, where financial contributions can become a tool of political pressure, affecting institutional independence, operational continuity, and long-term planning. To revitalize and strengthen the OSCE's role in regional security, the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Mitigate Procedural Deadlock:** Focus on resilience-oriented approaches and procedural flexibility to ensure continued operations despite the consensus-based "structural dead end."
- **Strengthen Financial Stability:** Increase extrabudgetary contributions, specifically supporting the Helsinki+50 Funding Framework, while ensuring these funds are not limited by donor-earmarked preferences.
- **Enhance Operational Capacity:** Expand secondment schemes and junior professional officer-type programs to increase diversity and geographical balance.
- **Avoid Suspension:** Prioritize procedural flexibility over the exclusion of participating states to maintain the Organization's function as a platform for dialogue.

Introduction

Regional intergovernmental organizations should play a key role in strengthening democracy in their Member States. Because they operate within smaller, more targeted locations, decision-making can be more responsive, cooperation easier to achieve, and resources more effectively directed toward regional priorities. Through their sustained presence and country-specific engagement, regional organizations contribute significantly to advancing human rights, democratic governance, and security. Through institutions such as the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, its field operations, and fact-finding missions, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has provided election assessments, supported democratic governance and rule-of-law reforms, and assisted participating states in strengthening human rights protections.

The current global governance system faces financial, political, and security-related instability, creating multiple challenges for intergovernmental institutions.[2] Ongoing global processes, including discussions on the future of multilateral cooperation, commitments under the Pact for the Future, and the UN80 reform initiative, highlight the growing need for more effective, responsive, and implementation-oriented institutions.[3] In this evolving context, regional organizations should increasingly be recognized as essential actors in the multilateral system and as key partners in monitoring and supporting States in fulfilling their commitments and legal obligations. Among regional organizations, the OSCE is particularly critical in operationalizing commitments, making its financial and procedural stability a matter of regional security concern.

Today, considerable attention is focused on the liquidity crisis at the United Nations (UN) and the ongoing debates surrounding the UN80 reform initiative.[4] In December 2025, the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly approved the UN Secretariat's core budget at $3.45 billion, representing a decrease of $270 million (7% lower) compared to 2025.[5] The reduction affected multiple pillars, including security, human rights, and development, and followed continued challenges related to UN Member States' delayed or withheld financial contributions.

This example illustrates a broader structural vulnerability within intergovernmental systems: When organizations depend on Member/participating states for funding, financial contributions can become a tool of political pressure or influence. Similar dynamics may also affect regional intergovernmental organizations, where selective payment of dues or financial leverage can be used strategically to shape internal priorities, decision-making processes, or institutional independence.

While much attention is paid to the UN liquidity crisis, there is far less awareness of the financial challenges facing the OSCE, whose operations have a direct impact across its participating states, especially in the context of ongoing wars, conflicts, and democratic backsliding across the region. Since 2021, the OSCE has operated without an approved annual budget because the consensus-based approach to financial decisions has been blocked.[6] As a result, the organization relied on temporary "provisional twelfths," or monthly emergency budgets, creating significant instability and hindering long-term planning for its operations and field missions.[7]

The policy problem addressed in this brief is that the consensus-based decision-making rule also applies to the adoption of the Unified Budget by the Permanent Council, allowing a single participating state to

block its adoption.[8] This creates structural financial instability and undermines the organization's ability to plan and implement its mandate.

At the same time, decisions and actions by participating states that contradict OSCE commitments, including the Helsinki principles (10 fundamental principles guiding relations between participating states), contribute to declining trust in the organization and weaken its institutional authority. This situation also creates practical risks for day-to-day functioning, as unstable funding limits long-term planning, staffing continuity, and the effectiveness of field operations.[9]

Taken together, this reflects a linked set of challenges: The consensus rule creates procedural blockage, political actions by participating states weaken trust in the organization, and the resulting financial uncertainty affects the OSCE's practical work and planning on the ground.

Addressing these challenges is crucial not only for operational continuity but also for ensuring that the OSCE can act as a credible regional mechanism supporting commitments under the Pact for the Future. This brief therefore examines how these procedural, political, and operational dynamics interact to affect the OSCE's institutional effectiveness and why addressing them is essential for maintaining the organization's role in regional security and governance. Agreeing on the Unified Budget took the OSCE five years. While its adoption in 2026 ended the immediate reliance on provisional twelfths, it does not prevent participating states from blocking the adoption of the Unified Budget again. For this reason, the OSCE and its participating states should take into account the lessons from this experience, work to avoid a similar crisis in the future, and address the challenges created by the five-year period of financial uncertainty. Therefore, this brief proposes measures to reduce the risk and impact of future budgetary deadlock, strengthen the OSCE's financial stability through more effective use of regular and extrabudgetary funding, and enhance its operational capacity. It also recommends greater coordination with other regional and international organizations and stronger use of the OSCE as a regional mechanism for supporting the implementation of relevant commitments under the Pact for the Future.

Developments, Evidence, and Consequences

On October 15, 2025, OSCE Secretary General Feridun H. Sinirlioğlu addressed the participating states at the Permanent Council meeting while presenting the Unified Budget proposal. The Secretary General warned that many participating states were facing "unprecedented financial pressures" and that the organization was operating in an environment "where spending on guns is more fashionable than on butter."[10] He stressed that continued financial uncertainty was already affecting the OSCE's ability to plan and maintain its operations.

The consequences of the prolonged budget deadlock had become increasingly visible. The OSCE faced financial deficits and constraints affecting core functions, including meeting support, utilities, and IT services. The Secretary General warned that "doing more with less" was no longer feasible and urged participating states to reach agreement on the budget.[11]

The Unified Budget was finally adopted in March 2026, ending five years of reliance on provisional spending arrangements. However, the agreement came after a prolonged period of financial uncertainty and with a budget approximately 10% lower than in 2021, contributing to the loss of more than a hundred positions.[12] The experience therefore demonstrated that the consequences of a delayed budget extend beyond temporary financing arrangements and can affect the organization's operational capacity.

More importantly, the adoption of the 2026 budget does not remove the underlying crisis of the system. The OSCE's Unified Budget is subject to consensus, meaning that any participating State can prevent its adoption. The five-year experience demonstrated how this rule can turn political disagreements into prolonged financial uncertainty, limiting expenditure, affecting staffing, and constraining long-term planning. Adopting the 2026 budget resolves the immediate challenges, but it does not prevent a similar situation from emerging in the future.

The five-year budget impasse reflected broader political divisions within the OSCE. Russia opposed the budget over concerns regarding the work of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), while Armenia and Azerbaijan objected in the context of disagreements over the organization's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.[13] More recently, the United States pushed for budget reductions of more than ten percent and linked them to calls for institutional reform.[14] These episodes demonstrate how disagreements over individual issues can become intertwined with the organization's financial decision-making.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's (OSCE PA) 2025 non-binding resolution on Securing the Stability of the Parliamentary Assembly's Financial Situation further highlighted concerns that the OSCE and the OSCE PA have been confronted by a "multitude of challenges."[15] These include ongoing violations of the Helsinki principles and participating states' failure to uphold their financial commitments to the organization.

The resolution confirmed that the Russian Federation has refused to pay its dues since 2022. Such financial non-compliance illustrated a broader governance challenge and recalled existing rules under which states that fail to meet their financial obligations may face consequences such as the suspension of voting rights.[16] Russia itself suspended its participation in the OSCE PA in 2024.[17]

Under Rule 41(5) of the Rules of Procedure,[18] delegations of participating states that fail to pay assessed contributions for a prolonged period may lose voting rights until payments are received, demonstrating how financial non-compliance can directly affect institutional participation and decision-making dynamics. However, despite repeated calls for action, it was not possible until 2026.[19]

The OSCE's experience therefore points to two related but distinct problems: the inability to guarantee timely adoption of the Unified Budget and the failure of some participating states to meet their financial obligations. While the adoption of the 2026 budget addressed the first problem for the immediate budget cycle, it has not removed the structural risk created by the consensus requirement or resolved broader questions surrounding the Organization's financial sustainability.

A central political factor behind the deterioration of the OSCE's political environment has been Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which contributed to deepened divisions among participating states and led to the termination of the Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, the Organization's largest field operation.[20] This resulted not only in the closure of a major operational presence but also in significant reductions in program expenditures, illustrating how political conflict directly translates into institutional and financial consequences for the OSCE. However, participating states once again failed to reach consensus on a budget for 2025, as disagreements linked to tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan contributed to a diplomatic impasse that the secretariat was unable to overcome.[21] Together, these developments suggest that the 2026 budget agreement should not be viewed as the end of the OSCE's financial problem, but as an opportunity to address the challenges exposed by the five-year crisis. The immediate deadlock has been resolved, but the underlying consensus-based procedure, financial pressures, and political divisions remain. This again proves that the OSCE's financial challenges are rooted not only in technical procedures but also in broader political dynamics, reinforcing the need to reconsider existing governance arrangements.[22]

The OSCE's Strategic Importance in the Current Regional Landscape

Recent developments across the OSCE region demonstrate the importance of maintaining a strong OSCE field presence, operations, and missions capable of monitoring human rights violations, supporting cooperation projects, and contributing to peace-building efforts that assist participating states in adhering to their international obligations under the Helsinki principles and related international legal mechanisms.

The security environment across the OSCE region illustrates that the challenges extend well beyond Russia's war against Ukraine and its ongoing brutal violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. Issues include hybrid interference and destabilization efforts in Moldova elections in 2024 and the Transnistria region;[23] continued systemic repression and closing down the civic space in Belarus;[24] the Russian Federation's occupation of Georgia's Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions alongside concerns over democratic backsliding and restrictions on fundamental freedoms within Georgia;[25] and broader geopolitical pressures, including cooperation among authoritarian powers and conflicts affecting the wider region, from Iran to the Israel-Gaza war.[26]

This list cannot be exhaustive given the rapidly emerging challenges across the region, but it demonstrates the scale and diversity of security, governance, and human rights risks that require sustained regional engagement. These challenges make predictable financing and operational capacity particularly important for the OSCE.

While working on peace, security, and the promotion of human rights within participating states, regional organizations play a crucial role. Because of its geographically focused mandate, the OSCE should remain one of the main actors promoting peace and security in the region. The five-year budget crisis, however, demonstrated how financial uncertainty can affect the organization's ability to deliver effective outcomes. This affects not only operational and long-term planning, but also the organization's capacity to strengthen field activities, including human rights and election observation missions through the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), supporting participating states in advancing democracy, the rule of law and human rights in the region.[27] Financial instability further affects internal practices, including recruitment and diversity. Increased reliance on secondments, which require nomination by participating states, can limit the pool of professionals, reduce diverse perspectives, and ultimately affect operational effectiveness.

The adoption of the 2026 Unified Budget provides an opportunity to restore greater predictability, but it does not remove the vulnerability exposed by the previous five years. As long as the Unified Budget depends on consensus, similar blockages remain possible. The experience therefore raises a broader question of how the OSCE can maintain its operational capacity when political disagreements prevent timely financial decisions, making institutional reform necessary.

Strengthening the OSCE and its field capacity would directly support participating states in meeting their commitments under the Pact for the Future, particularly Actions 13–27 on peace and security.[28]

Procedural Limits and Exceptions

As we see, the simplest solution to the current problem that has been widely voiced is to change the Rules of Procedure. Article 2 (2) explicitly states that "Decisions of the OSCE decision-making bodies shall be adopted by consensus. Consensus shall be understood to mean the absence of any objection expressed by a participating State to the adoption of the decision in question."[29]

Changing this procedure would itself require consensus, with the same rule, creating a significant obstacle to institutional reform. The rule designed to ensure collective ownership of decisions can therefore also make institutional adaptation difficult when political divisions deepen. The five-year delay in adopting the Unified Budget demonstrated the practical consequences of this vulnerability.

Exceptions to the consensus-based rule

The OSCE framework does contain limited exceptions to the consensus principle. One is the "consensus minus one" procedure, which may be applied in cases involving a clear, gross, and uncorrected violation of commitments by a participating state. This mechanism was invoked once, in July 1992, in relation to Yugoslavia.[30] In legal terms, this demonstrates that the organization's rules do allow action without full consensus where serious violations occur.

Another procedural option exists under the Valletta Mechanism,[31] where the Ministerial Council can instruct two participating states in dispute to seek conciliation regardless of their objection ("consensus minus two"). Although this option has never been used, it confirms that the OSCE legal framework includes tools designed to address serious disputes even when consensus is blocked; however, no similar procedures exist for financial and budgetary commitments.

Neither mechanism, however, directly addresses the problem examined in this brief: the inability to secure timely agreement on the Unified Budget. These exceptions therefore do not resolve the underlying financial vulnerability created by the consensus requirement.

More importantly, suspension risks weakening the organization's core function as a platform for dialogue. Excluding a participating state could deepen political divisions and reduce the organization's ability to deploy monitoring mechanisms or maintain channels of communication, while primarily affecting citizens rather than political elites. It may also set a precedent for future exclusions, potentially generating repeated institutional crises rather than resolving structural problems.

For these reasons, policy solutions should prioritize procedural flexibility, financial stabilization, and alternative funding mechanisms over exclusion-based solutions.

Responses to financial pressures

In the scholarship, three principal responses by international organizations to financial pressure are identified. When confronted with budgetary constraints, international organizations may respond by

exhibiting inertia, maintaining the status quo despite contestation; by pursuing adaptation, adjusting policies or priorities to align with the preferences of contesting states; or by building resilience, developing strategies to withstand and manage external pressure.[32]

A combination of adaptation and resilience appears to characterize the OSCE's current responses, including increased reliance on extrabudgetary funding and efforts to manage political pressure while maintaining core functions. However, these approaches have not resolved longstanding structural challenges. Extrabudgetary funds are earmarked and remain limited to specific policy areas and tend to shift activities toward short-term initiatives.[33] Research on international organizations also finds that greater reliance on earmarked funding is associated with weaker organizational processes, including strategic planning and operational management.[34] Some participating states are reluctant to finance politically sensitive activities, particularly those of ODIHR, through extrabudgetary contributions, preferring such activities to be funded through the Unified Budget.[35] Applying these approaches in the OSCE context suggests that resilience-oriented measures and adaptive engagement with participating states may reduce the impact of financial deadlock and political contestation, but they do not eliminate the underlying structural constraints.

Recommendations

Given the constraints discussed above, the following recommendations focus on specific and realistic measures that can be implemented within the OSCE's existing framework. Rather than seeking to immediately change the consensus rule, they aim to strengthen the organization's financial resilience, operational capacity, and strategic planning, while reducing the risk and impact of future budgetary deadlock. The five-year impasse should also inform future planning by assessing how prolonged procedural blockages could affect the organization's operations and decision-making processes and by developing contingency measures to maintain core functions if a similar situation occurs again.

1. Mitigate procedural deadlock and strengthen resilience

- Recognize the structural risk created by the OSCE's consensus-based budget procedure. While changing the Rules of Procedure remains politically difficult, participating states should focus on measures to mitigate the impact of the deadlock and ensure continued operations despite procedural constraints.
- Encourage procedural flexibility and resilience-oriented approaches within the OSCE, including effective and developing practical contingency measures to allow the organization to maintain core functions when consensus cannot be reached.
- Assess the operational impact of the five-year budget impasse. The OSCE should undertake a targeted assessment of how the absence of an approved Unified Budget affected staffing, field operations, program implementation, and long-term planning. The findings should inform contingency planning and help identify the functions and resources that need to be protected if a similar situation occurs again. The assessment will help to:
  - Identify critical functions that cannot be interrupted and minimum resources required to maintain them during a prolonged impasse,
  - establish early-warning indicators for when financial uncertainty begins affecting operations,
  - develop a contingency plan for long- and short-term budgetary disruption,
  - identify which functions could be supported through flexible extrabudgetary funding,
  - assess the consequences of prolonged vacancies and reliance on secondments,
  - review which existing procedures actually helped the OSCE continue functioning during the five years.

2. Strengthen financial stability

- Maintain and increase extrabudgetary contributions to sustain operations. The Helsinki+50 Funding Framework (H+50 Fund), launched in July 2025 during Finland's Chairpersonship,[36] to support the OSCE's operational capacity should be strengthened as an additional source of support. The adoption of the Unified Budget should not lead to the Fund's discontinuation. Instead, the Fund should be maintained as a longer-term financial reserve to strengthen the OSCE's resilience and provide additional support if future budgetary deadlock arises.

- Reduce excessive earmarking of extrabudgetary contributions. Allocations should, where possible, respond to the OSCE's operational and programmatic needs rather than being limited to donor-preferred areas.

Strengthen the case for predictable core funding. Participating states should ensure that both regular and extrabudgetary contributions are predictable and provide sufficient resources to enable the OSCE to fulfill its mandates. Strengthen the OSCE as a regional mechanism for implementing multilateral commitments

Coordinate with other regional and international organizations, including the United Nations and Council of Europe, to complement rather than duplicate existing efforts and ensure their activities are mutually reinforcing, demonstrating to states the practical value of contributing to both regular budgets and extra-budgetary initiatives. This is particularly relevant in light of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's Porto Declaration 2025, which welcomed the adoption of the Pact and its annexes, describing it as "an urgent global appeal for strengthening multilateralism, promoting sustainable development, and addressing emerging global challenges."[37] Use the OSCE as a regional mechanism to support the implementation of the Pact for the Future security commitments (Actions 13–27), ensuring that preventive diplomacy, conflict prevention, and dialogue facilitation translate global commitments into practical regional action. Specifically, Pact for the Future Action 16 promotes cooperation, understanding, preventive diplomacy, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, highlighting the importance of dialogue among states. It further reaffirms the central role of the United Nations and its partnerships with regional and subregional organizations in preventing and resolving conflicts in accordance with the UN Charter. Strengthening the OSCE's operational and political support to participating states would therefore directly contribute to implementing these commitments at the regional level.[38]

3. Enhance operational capacity and institutional effectiveness

- Expand secondment schemes and establish OSCE-focused Junior Professional Officer type programs that support both nationals of contributing states and candidates from other participating states, increasing diversity, geographical balance, and institutional capacity.

The continued political use of the OSCE demonstrates why the platform remains necessary, because participating states still need a place to engage, even when relations are difficult. Its regional coverage and broad mandate provide an important platform for dialogue, peacemaking, peacebuilding, and the promotion and protection of human rights. The adoption of the 2026 Unified Budget is an important step, but it does not remove the possibility of future budgetary deadlock. The experience of the past five years should therefore inform the Organization's future planning, including measures to protect its core functions and maintain its capacity to respond when political disagreements again affect decision-making.

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