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POLICY BRIEF

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The Role of Environment and Climate in Reshaping Comprehensive Security

by Zane Šime

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research forms a considerable proportion of understanding about the work and impact of the OSCE. Recognising this crucial role of knowledge production, complex interregionalism is the suggested framework for future analysis of the role that the OSCE, its Economic and Environmental Dimension, and the Environment and Security Initiative play in comprehensive (co-)governing of security in Europe. Climate change, as a general risk multiplier and an issue that has been a subject of measures adopted by several international and Europe-based organizations, allows for taking a fresh look at the earlier OSCE achievements, such as those accomplished via environmental confidence-building measures. Amidst the evolving understanding of the risk perception in Europe, past successes could be brought forward in a tailored manner by several strands of the Economic and Environmental Dimension. The recently commenced Decade of Action is an opportunity to strengthen the founding spirit of the Helsinki Final Act in alignment with the most recent considerations of comprehensive security. Reinvigorated attention to the complementarities delivered by other key European forums deserves further attention to discern the unique value-added delivery by the OSCE and the sustainability of its achieved results.

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Introduction

The Economic and Environmental Dimension (EED) and the Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) should be duly appraised as an important framework that helps to reduce various tensions and security risks in Europe. The argument builds on earlier acknowledgements of an observed link between conflicts within states and their connection to environmental causes (ENVSEC 2013, 7-8). More recently, the role of climate change has been acknowledged as “a ‘threat multiplier’ in that it exacerbates already existing risks and threats” (Bremberg 2018, 2). This brief concisely argues why it is vital to explore the role of the OSCE EED and ENVSEC via a complex interregionalist lens during the mapping and evaluation of the contemporary European security conditions.

The brief builds on the agenda of the 2020 Albanian Chairmanship that strived to remain vigilant towards the evolution of challenges and risk factors:

“Many of our contemporary security challenges will continue for the foreseeable future. Others will evolve and new ones will emerge. This requires participating States to reflect on how to employ and adapt OSCE instruments to our changing context, while continuing to protect and promote rights and freedoms.” (Albanian OSCE Chairmanship 2020, 7)

Likewise, the Albanian Chairmanship promoted dialogue with the Mediterranean and Asian partners and exchanges with the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) among others (Albanian OSCE Chairmanship 2020, 9). Thus, a suggested focus on complex interregionalism elaborated in the subsequent sections of the brief mirrors the policy-makers aspirations to promote multifaceted consultations on the evolution of security issues.

Towards Complex Interregionalism

One reason why it is so important to keep environmental matters and climate change in the overall debate on traditional security issues in Europe is that “the very essence of the OSCE is its cross-dimensional conception of security relations” (Munk 2015, 3). Despite the scholarly judgment that the EED has been “overlooked, misunderstood or neglected” (Fawn & Lutterjohann 2019, 262), it attracts attention because it has particular relevance to the contemporary realities faced by the OSCE (OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions 2017, 15). Another reason for the topicality of the environment, its degradation, and the climate in the traditional security context is the OSCE’s acknowledgement that “the border between non-military” confidence-building measures and military confidence and security-building measures “is fluid and they are best used in a mutually reinforcing manner where appropriate” (OSCE Secretariat’s Conflict Prevention Centre 2013, 11; Raith 2021, 2-3).

The majority of reviewed analysis dedicated to the interactions between certain areas of Europe, international organisations and OSCE, in general, and ENVSEC, in particular, are informative and convincing about the OSCE’s delivered value to promoting peaceful relations in Europe. However, it might be questioned whether several of these research outputs have thoroughly addressed the contextual factors that come along with the consultations and activities of other Europe-wide forums (often evolving simultaneously). While “[s]oft power mechanisms such as norm diffusion, where the OSCE is strongest, are [...] difficult to measure” (Friesendorf 2021, 14), OSCE is not the only organisation engaged in these tacit processes. It further complicates a clear distinction between the OSCE resonance and the impact of other organisations mentioned in the subsequent sections.

Such a somewhat siloed focus solely on the OSCE might be to the detriment of grasping the full complexities of European governance and complementarities that are generated by several Europe-wide formats, such as the Council of Europe and the EU. The OSCE has recognised the positive synergies delivered by concerted outreach activities that were implemented in cooperation with the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the Council of Europe (OSCE Secretariat's Conflict Prevention Centre, Operations Service 2013, 75). The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and several UN-affiliated international bodies are close collaboration partners of the OSCE. More cooperation is recommended also in the future (Zellner 2020, 9). When NATO's capacity to project stability is critically analysed, the OSCE is among alternative multilateral forums suggested for further consideration (Larsen and Koehler 2020, 39-40). ENVSEC has been a promising framework to explore the environment-security nexus, its evolution towards incorporating climate change as a risk multiplier and crafting comprehensive confidence-building measures to strengthen European security and stability. However, it is doubted whether the reviewed case studies help to explain the overall distinct role of the OSCE.

This is an invitation among the scholarly circles to look more thoroughly at the full horizontal complexities of European governance, not just certain traits of the vertical layers. Interregionalism studies emerged around the mid-1990s with 'soft balancing' as one of the most prominent explored topics (Rüland 2010, 1273-1274). Complex interregionalism builds on these grounds. It refers to "the changing interlinkages of bilateral, regional, interregional and transregional relations developed between the EU and regions around the globe" (Söderbaum 2016, 184). The term captures "a multi-dimensional model of interregionalism, in which the coexistence of multi-level diplomacy and institutional structures with mixed motivations and strategies on the parts of the actors involved forms the key element" (Hardacre and Smith 2009, 171). Complex interregionalism has given impetus for the more nuanced study of the distinct traits of actorness pursued by the EU and ASEAN (Müller 2016), including responses to the COVID-19 outbreak (Kliem 2021). Points of divergence are kept on the radar as well (Tan 2020, 50).

This policy brief argues that it is useful for the study of other Europe-based organisations to increase the overall understanding of the diversity of factors and contextual features that affect the initiatives pursued by organisations. The OSCE should be no exception. However, considering that complex interregionalism emanates from a study of the EU relations with other regions, incorporating this lens in OSCE related analysis would require carving out a distinct approach. Scholarly thinking on ASEAN is an example of how that has been already pursued. Without paying sufficient attention to the OSCE specific characteristics, the complex interregionalist study might just as well go down the road of moulding the OSCE to become more like the EU for the sake of being a more convenient interlocutor to the EU.

Complex interregionalism embraces the density and thickness of multi-vector interactions shaping and leaving certain imprints on various regionalist dynamics. It allows to fully acknowledge the multitude of influences affecting certain geographical areas via simultaneously implemented regionalist projects that are much more multifaceted than a combination of several confidence-building measures pursued at different track levels and in different sectors (Herbert 2014, 2). This perspective on regionalist developments tallies with the earlier scholarly thinking on the need to look at the OSCE's pursued confidence-building in the context of formats in which its participating states interact (OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions 2017, 19).

Earlier research has shown valuable exchanges that boost the work of the OSCE, such as the cooperative consultations on initiatives pursued by the Baltic Sea area entities and the mountain-focused region-building efforts in South-East Europe (Wohlfeld 2001; Djordjevic 2014). Such selection of empirical focus on distinct geographical areas is not surprising given the earlier acknowledgement of a need for a "basin-wide or ecosystem approach" (ENVSEC 2013, 7). Furthermore, it echoes the UN thinking on the 'problems without passports', in other words, challenges that transcend borders (United Nations 1998; Annan 2009; Plibersek 2015). This term has proven its enduring relevance with reoccurring references expressed throughout various gatherings focusing on multilateral collaboration.

There are some promising grounds laid for such a turn in the analysis of the OSCE activities. It is demonstrated by earlier analysis with a focus on mountain governance: “Scale as a social construction [...] has been described as “nested hierarchy of bounded spaces of differing size, such as the local, regional, national and global” [...], linked by vertical or horizontal shifts of authority [...]” (Djordjevic 2014, 5). This example gives confidence that the OSCE is a promising organisation for a study on other regionalist traits unleashed by its initiatives that address a variety of environmental and climate issues.

Both of the discussed geographic settings analysed in the earlier research demonstrates the capacity of intellectual circles preoccupied with the OSCE to “transcend the conventional obsession with the nation-state as the dominant political unit in the global system” and embrace the complexity and multi-level governance structure in which the role of state undergoes a profound transformation (Söderbaum & Van Langenhove 2005, 254). It is a crucial precondition for the proper adoption of the complex interregionalist lens in the future study of the OSCE.

Oftentimes earlier studies focusing on the OSCE display sporadic episodes or comments on OSCE’s successful engagement with other entities whose work contributes to the OSCE overarching goals. Besides, the suggested complex interregionalist lens gains prominence in a contemporary setting where “many other, better-financed institutions crowd out the OSCE” (Fawn & Lutterjohann 2019, 264), for example, the EU is referred to as “draining other organisations” (Barston 2019, 121). The European Neighbourhood Policy with its support instruments is one such example (Fawn & Lutterjohann 2019, 278-281). Furthermore, “[t]he EU’s external actions in the field of climate security take on different forms, but two strands are particularly relevant, namely, climate diplomacy and climate finance. For the EU, climate diplomacy refers to actions” undertaken by the EU Foreign Affairs Council, the European External Action Service and the European Commission “to shape international cooperation on climate change” (Bremberg 2018, 5).

This and the fact that a list of other EU instruments, such as the EU Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation that fund environmental and climate-related projects, offer engagement options to non-EU entities denotes that a proper look at the EU would require more than an analysis of the European Neighbourhood Policy.

The importance of looking at OSCE activities in a broader multilateral context is further strengthened by the earlier scholarly estimation that “[t]he political clout of the OSCE might, thus, seem limited in the short-to-medium-term, at least compared to the EU and NATO, but as a regional platform its potential seemingly lies more in its ability to affect long-term change in perceptions and practices” (Bremberg 2018, 10). More analysis beyond an acknowledgement of mutually beneficial complementarities would help to make better-informed decisions (Bremberg 2018, 13). This suggestion should be considered with the full awareness that beyond the multilaterally steered dynamics, the complex interregionalism welcomes an analysis of a broader multi-vector interaction, such as the ties structured along the lines of bilateral cooperation.

Environmental Considerations and Security

“The initial purpose of ENVSEC was to identify and evaluate environment-related security risks in South-East Europe and Central Asia” (Bremberg 2018, 8). The topicality of environmental issues in the traditional security context is not new. One of the best examples of this nexus is the fact that NATO became an observer of ENVSEC one year after the initiative’s establishment and contributes to it via its Science for Peace and Security Programme with a special focus on the vulnerable regions (ENVSEC 2013, 7). ENVSEC has proven its receptiveness towards a broader variety of concerns voiced by the UN. This would be an illustrative example that seems to echo across the OSCE employed measures: “The question is less and less one of whether climate change is a security threat or a ‘threat multiplier’, but one of how we can assess and manage the risks associated with climate change and its security implications as an international community.”

(“The UN Environment Programme on Climate Change and International Security” 2011, 606). Consequently, climate-related security risks have been accommodated (Bremberg 2018, 8). Perhaps this ‘climate turn’ might be a window of opportunity to reflect on the new role of the EED in addressing contemporary challenges, thus also keeping the historical spirit of the Helsinki Final Act relevant amidst the evolving considerations.

“The ENVSEC Initiative has established the Environment and Security Network, a voluntary alliance of potential and future partners, inter- and non-governmental organisations, development banks, the media, academia, foundations and donors, who will work together towards the common goal of addressing transboundary and interlinked environment and security risks” (ENVSEC 2013, 46). Besides, its landmark Aarhus Centres support the practical implementation of the Aarhus Convention, thereby upholding the ambition of “every person’s right to a healthy environment” (OSCE 2012, 5). Among thematic areas covered by the Aarhus Centres is water management. It is a good example of how environmental matters are incorporated into confidence-building efforts (OSCE Network of Think Tanks and Academic Institutions 2017, 19). Seen from the complex interregionalist perspective, these strands of ENVSEC should be treated as promising sources of empirical insights for a more contextually embedded evaluation of the EED. Its future modalities should be treated as a distinct pattern in a broader set of environmental and climate-related initiatives that are implemented by several multilateral actors and bilateralism driven initiatives.

Last but not least, ENVSEC is a good example of how the OSCE remains in sync with global coordination patterns. It has adjusted ENVSEC from Rio+20’s heightened interest in the green economy (OSCE 2012, 22-23; “The UN Environment Programme on Climate Change and International Security” 2011, 65) to the current patterns structuring the understanding of peace and environment captured by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (ENVSEC 2016). However, it should be kept in mind that the OSCE is far from the sole Europe-wide forum that supports the SDGs. The EU is known for its unique take on SDGs (Šime 2017, 2020). Such trickled-down patterns of policy action should be kept in mind in view of drafting recommendations for future OSCE actions.

Conclusion

The security challenges in Europe can no longer be explained by a narrow focus on traditional security considerations. Climate change is a risk multiplier that several organisations in Europe have geared up to address. Complex interregionalism helps to better acknowledge the thick governance layers, their accompanying initiatives and a multitude of contextual factors that should be taken into consideration when thinking about new environmental confidence-building measures or the upcoming evaluation of these measures, especially their implications on the aspects falling into the domain of traditional security considerations.

Complex interregionalism is a promising framework for further elaboration on how past successes should be brought forward amidst the changing understanding of the risk perception and security considerations across the key European forums. ENVSEC evolution along the UN lines of thinking and the UN crafted policy frameworks proves that the OSCE is a highly receptive organisation. OSCE embraces the evolution of intellectual currents governing upper layers of governance. Thus, the organisation is well-equipped to remain “a world-innovator in comprehensive security” (Fawn & Lutterjohann 2019, 262). There should be no doubt that at the commencement of the Decade of Action, ENVSEC’s close alignment with the SDGs will be a helpful enabler in the overall reflection process what should be the best way forward in tailoring the environmental confidence-building measures in a way that would complement the niche expertise developed by the EU and NATO, among others.

However, to achieve this intellectual leap a scholarly input with a more thorough analysis of simultaneous regionalist efforts, as well as environmental and climate-related initiatives, implemented by other Europe-based organisations and forums covering certain parts of the continent, would be useful. The OSCE is far from the sole multilateral forum in Europe that aspires to deliver its fair share of progress during the Decade of Action.

Recommendations

- Research delivers a substantial proportion of understanding about the work and impact of the OSCE. Therefore, this crucial component of meaning-making should be constantly re-evaluated and upgraded according to the latest identified complexities.
- During future mapping and evaluation of the European security conditions and employed response measures, it is worth exploring the EED and the ENVSEC via the complex interregionalist lens to enhance the understanding of the distinct value that these OSCE components bring to the overall landscape of European governance.
- A more nuanced analysis of horizontal complementarities across key multilateral forums focusing on Europe would help to map how different efforts both tied to the SDGs, as well as distinctively environmental and climate-related matters, discern the unique value-added delivered by the OSCE and the sustainability of results delivered by its assistance.

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