

OSCE Ministerial Council in Skopje: concessions to Russia in the name of preserving the institution

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The annual meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council took place from 30 November to 1 December in the capital of North Macedonia. Due to the participation of Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in the meeting, the foreign ministers of five countries boycotted the event (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Poland) and were represented by lower-ranking diplomats. In order to avoid meeting the Russian minister, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken did not attend the session either; instead he paid a short visit to Skopje on 29 November, on the eve of the Council's meeting. At the last minute the Council agreed to entrust the organisation's chairmanship for 2024 to Malta (after Moscow and Minsk blocked the proposed candidacy of Estonia) and to extend for nine months the terms of four senior officials whose terms were expiring this year (the Secretary-General, the High Commissioner for National Minorities, the Representative on the Freedom of the Media and the Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions & Human Rights). Russia and Belarus, meanwhile, blocked the adoption of a new annual budget for the third time (the OSCE currently operates on a provisional budget basis, which does not allow for any new projects).

Commentary

- For Lavrov, this was the first opportunity to address the OSCE Ministerial Council he had had since Russia launched its full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022. Last year, when Poland held the rotational chairmanship and hosted the annual ministerial meeting in Łódź, it denied visas to those members of the Russian delegation (including Lavrov) who had been sanctioned by the EU. North Macedonia, under the influence of the US and key Western European states, decided differently, and allowed Lavrov to enter the EU and appear at the meeting of the Ministerial Council; this was presumably in return for Russia's assent to Malta's chairmanship in the organisation in 2024, and to an extension of the terms of office of the four officials mentioned above (decisions in the OSCE require unanimity). Most Western states deem it necessary – even at the cost of concessions to Russia – to preserve the OSCE as the only existing multilateral platform which could permit possible future dialogue with Moscow. In order to accommodate the Russian delegation, the North Macedonian government lifted the ban on flights from Russia for three days – although even then the plane carrying the Russian delegation was forced to take a circuitous route over Turkey and Greece, as Bulgaria denied it access to its airspace. At the same time, North Macedonia's foreign minister Bujar Osmani in his opening address unequivocally expressed his support for Ukraine, his opposition to a

return to so-called business as usual with Russia and his willingness to turn the OSCE into a platform for holding Moscow accountable for the war against Ukraine.

- Minister Lavrov used his participation in the meeting to deliver a speech aimed at ridiculing Western diplomacy. Despite the Kremlin's violation of the basic principles of international law and the rules of the OSCE, Western states had to make concessions to Russia in order to obtain its agreement to the organisation's continued functioning: the selection of Malta as chair of the organisation in 2024 (after Moscow had blocked Estonia's application for the candidacy) and the nine-month extension of the mandate of its most senior officials (instead of appointing new ones for full three-year terms). Remaining in the organisation gives Russia a platform to spread its propaganda, best exemplified by Minister Lavrov's press conference following the end of the meeting. It also provides additional opportunities for the Kremlin to exploit the differences among Western states regarding what policies they should pursue towards Russia. Another tactical advantage is the entanglement of Western diplomacy in time- and energy-consuming efforts and negotiations to maintain the formal existence of the organisation.
- Statements by representatives of the US, UK, Germany and France at the Ministerial Council session in Skopje show that these countries still regard the OSCE as a forum for dialogue and cooperation among states in the Euro-Atlantic area, one that should survive the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Germany's foreign minister Annalena Baerbock called for the organisation not to allow itself to be destroyed by Russia. The UK Minister of State for the Armed Forces, James Heappey, drew attention to the key role the OSCE has played in investigating Russian crimes in Ukraine through the so-called Moscow Mechanism; the French Secretary of State for European Affairs Laurence Boone spoke in a similar vein. The US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien, representing the US before the Council instead of Secretary Blinken, condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine and suggested that both Russia (and by implication Belarus) were outside the "civilised community". At the same time, for the United States the OSCE serves as a forum for discussing the security of the wider Euro-Atlantic area including Russia, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Washington believes that in the short term, it offers an opportunity, for example, to highlight Russian crimes in Ukraine and to collect evidence of Russia's culpability. In the long term, it might provide a mechanism for promoting democracy, the rule of law and human rights that could also be applicable to Russia in case it returns to the path of cooperation, as pointed out by the US ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter.
- The OSCE was created in 1995 to provide a framework and principles for cooperation in the spheres of security, economy and human rights in an area encompassing Europe, the United States and Canada, as well as the Central Asian states of the former USSR. From the outset the effectiveness of the organisation was limited because Russia and the West approached it from fundamentally different premises and with opposing objectives. The West hoped that the OSCE would serve as a mechanism for Russia's "socialisation", i.e. its gradual acceptance of the post-Cold War security order in Europe. For Moscow, however, OSCE membership was an instrument to revise the new order and lead Russia to restore its great-power status. Moscow's aim was to transform the organisation into a system of collective security with the elimination or significant weakening of military

alliances, such as NATO, and the creation of spheres of influence – with the post-Soviet states as Russia’s area of exclusive influence, particularly in the security sphere. As Russia emerged from the systemic crisis it had suffered in the 1990s, the Kremlin became increasingly assertive within the organisation; in particular it exploited the principle of consensus to restrict or paralyse its activities in the areas of promoting democracy and human rights (for which the ODIHR was responsible). In the area of security, a watershed moment came when Russia suspended its participation in the adapted version of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (the so-called CFE-2 Treaty) negotiated within the OSCE and signed in 1999. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the uselessness of the OSCE as a mechanism for European security. There is no indication that the organisation will be able to fulfil its mission, despite the formal ‘success’ of the ministerial meeting in agreeing on Malta’s candidacy for chairmanship in the OSCE in 2024 and in extending the tenure of key officials in the organisation for nine months.