

The OSCE's principles keep us all safe - if we let them

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Four years ago, on 24 February 2022, Russia launched its unjustified and illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The date is now etched into Europe's memory: a morning of missiles and sirens that shattered peace for millions of Ukrainians. It also confronted every European with a stark question: would force decide our continent's future, or would law, dignity, and the right of nations to choose their own path prevail? Today, on this fourth anniversary, our answer is unchanged and unwavering: we stand with Ukraine - its defence, its sovereignty, and its territorial integrity, today, tomorrow, and for as long as it takes.

Some may ask: what is the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and why does it matter in 2026? The OSCE is the world's largest regional security body, bringing together 57 countries from Vancouver to Vladivostok. It was founded on simple, powerful principles: do not use force to change borders; respect sovereignty and territorial integrity; protect human rights; and resolve disputes by peaceful means. These principles, codified in the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and the Charter of Paris in 1990, are not abstractions. They are the guardrails that keep Europe safe. When they are broken - as Russia has done through the illegal annexation of Crimea, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and ongoing strikes that devastate civilians and critical infrastructure - the result is suffering, instability, and a more dangerous world for everyone.

In recent months, Russia has claimed that the OSCE has "turned away" from its founding spirit. The facts say otherwise. The OSCE's tools were actively used to try to prevent this war and to limit the danger once it began. Before the invasion, participating States - including ours - invoked mechanisms designed to reduce military risks and demand transparency: urgent risk reduction inquiries, early warning alerts, and political dialogue tracks aimed at easing tensions and clarifying military activities. Russia refused to engage in good faith. It dodged meetings, ignored formal requests for information, and filled the diplomatic space with false narratives. This is not a failure of the OSCE and its tools; it is a failure of Russia to respect the rules it once agreed to.

The consequences of that refusal are visible in every shattered apartment block and darkened power station in Ukraine. Week after week, in Vienna - where the OSCE's key bodies meet - our countries condemn Russia's ongoing aggression and call for a return to the basic commitments designed to keep us safe. We seek dialogue rooted in facts and law. Russia answers with propaganda and unsubstantiated accusations that have no place in a rules-based forum.

One breach of trust cuts especially deep for all of us who work in this institution. Three OSCE staff members - Vadym Golda, Maksym Petrov, and Dmytro Shabanov - have been held in Russian detention since April 2022. They were seized while carrying out official duties under a mandate all OSCE countries agreed to. Nearly four years later, they remain unjustly detained. No state that imprisons international civil servants for doing their jobs can credibly claim to defend the principles of European security.

What does all of this mean for people far from the front lines? It means that our security is

interconnected. If borders can be redrawn by force in Ukraine, then no country's independence is secure. If the targeting of civilians becomes routine, then conflict everywhere becomes more brutal. That is why our commitment is not only to Ukraine, but first and foremost to the idea of Europe as a place governed by rules rather than fear. The OSCE's promise - open dialogue, transparency in military affairs, human rights, and the peaceful settlement of disputes - is not only a technical matter for diplomats. It is the difference between the Europe we want and a Europe we should all fear.

We will keep the platform of the OSCE to speak the truth about the war, to reduce risks, and to keep accountability alive. We will continue to respond to the false claims that Russia tries to promote, and we will not allow them to tarnish our faith in the tools and structures that supported peace in Europe for decades. The OSCE, its tools and its principles, will also be ready to play an important role in rebuilding Ukraine and supporting a just and lasting peace.

On this fourth anniversary, we reaffirm a simple truth: peace built on justice endures; peace imposed by force collapses. The road back to peace runs through respect for Ukraine's independence, restoration of its territorial integrity, accountability for crimes, and the release of those unjustly detained - including our OSCE colleagues. That is the path we will keep pursuing - in Vienna, in our capitals, and with partners across the globe - until this war ends on terms that honour the Helsinki Final Act and the lives it protects.

Signed,

The Permanent Representatives of France, Germany and the United Kingdom to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-osces-principles-keep-us-all-safe-if-we-let-them>