

When an International Organization Fails to Legitimate

Citation for published version (APA):

Schütte, L., & Dijkstra, H. (2023). When an International Organization Fails to Legitimate: The Decline of the OSCE. *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3(4), Article ksad057. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad057>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/10/2023

DOI:

[10.1093/isagsq/ksad057](https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad057)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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When an International Organization Fails to Legitimate: The Decline of the OSCE

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Various international organizations have recently faced legitimacy crises, but many have demonstrated resilience and relegitimated their rule. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is an exception. It is clearly an organization in decline and is on the brink of irrelevance. The closure of its Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine in April 2022 in the wake of the Russian attack is only the latest manifestation of the organization's long-term legitimacy crisis. Based on the case of the OSCE, this article contributes to the study of legitimacy crises to better understand when such crises can lead to decline. Drawing on twenty interviews with senior officials, the analysis suggests that the OSCE's failure to (re)legitimate has two interrelated causes: (1) the organization's institutional weaknesses and impeded leadership have prevented OSCE actors from engaging in effective legitimization practices, and (2) the heterogeneous and largely zero-sum preferences of the OSCE participating states have made them unwilling audiences for (re)legitimation practices. In doing so, the article contributes to our comprehension of the consequences of legitimacy crises.

Différentes organisations internationales ont récemment été confrontées à des crises de légitimité, mais nombre d'entre elles ont fait preuve de résilience et ont à nouveau légitimé leur action. L'Organisation pour la sécurité et la coopération en Europe (OSCE) est une exception. Elle est clairement sur le déclin et frôle l'inutilité. La clôture de sa mission spéciale d'observation en Ukraine en avril 2022 à la suite de l'attaque russe n'est que la dernière manifestation de la crise de légitimité à long terme de l'organisation. En se fondant sur le cas de l'OSCE, cet article contribue à l'étude des crises de légitimité pour mieux comprendre quand ces crises peuvent déboucher sur un déclin. En se basant sur vingt entretiens avec de hauts fonctionnaires, l'analyse suggère que l'échec de l'OSCE quand il s'agit de se (re) légitimer possède deux causes interreliées : 1) les faiblesses institutionnelles de l'organisation et une direction entravée ont empêché les acteurs de l'OSCE d'utiliser des pratiques de légitimation efficaces, et 2) les préférences hétérogènes et largement à somme nulle des États participants à l'OSCE ont fait d'eux un public réticent aux pratiques de (re)légitimation. Ce faisant, l'article contribue à notre compréhension des conséquences des crises de légitimité.

Varias organizaciones internacionales han tenido que enfrentarse recientemente a crisis en materia de legitimidad. Sin embargo, muchas de ellas han demostrado su resiliencia y han podido relegitimar su papel. En este marco, la Organización para la Seguridad y la Cooperación en Europa (OSCE) resulta una excepción ya que se trata, claramente, de una organización que está en declive y en los límites de la irrelevancia. El cierre de su Misión Especial de Observación en Ucrania, que tuvo lugar en abril de 2022 a raíz del ataque ruso, es solo la última manifestación de la crisis de legitimidad que sufre la organización desde hace tiempo. Este artículo parte del caso de la OSCE para contribuir al estudio de las crisis de legitimidad con el fin de llegar a comprender mejor cuándo tales crisis pueden conducir a un declive. El análisis sugiere, basándose en los datos obtenidos de veinte entrevistas con altos funcionarios, que el fracaso de la OSCE para (re)legitimarse tiene dos causas interrelacionadas: 1) las debilidades institucionales de la organización, así como su obstaculizado liderazgo, han impedido que los agentes de la OSCE puedan participar en prácticas de legitimación efectivas, y 2) las preferencias heterogéneas y de suma cero, en gran medida, por parte de los Estados participantes de la OSCE los han convertido en audiencias reacias a las prácticas de (re)legitimación. Por todo esto, el artículo contribuye a nuestra comprensión de las consecuencias de las crisis de legitimidad.

Introduction

International organizations (IOs), as key institutions governing international cooperation, have been repeatedly challenged over the last decade. Ranging from the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), World Trade Organization (WTO), United Nations (UN) Security Council, and the World Health Orga-

nization (WHO), state and non-state actors have contested the "right to rule" of IOs. Notwithstanding the seriousness of some of these challenges, an increasingly prominent research agenda on IO legitimacy demonstrates that IOs tend to be rather resilient. Indeed, various scholars show that many IOs have responded to crises of legitimacy by engaging in (re)legitimation practices and other strategic responses (e.g., [Chorev 2012](#); [Gronau and Schmidtke 2016](#); [Tallberg and Zürn 2019](#); [Hirschmann 2021](#); [Schuette 2021a, 2021b](#); [Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin 2022](#); [Dijkstra et al. 2022](#); [Lenz](#)

*The author represents his own views, not necessarily those of the Munich Security Conference.

Schuette, Leonard, and Hylke Dijkstra. (2023) When an International Organization Fails to Legitimate: The Decline of the OSCE. *Global Studies Quarterly*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad057>

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and Söderbaum 2023). They even note that legitimacy crises can be conceived as a “wake-up call” (Agné and Söderbaum 2022; Sommerer et al. 2022: 11), which can paradoxically result in a recommitment to, or deepening of, international cooperation (Zürn 2018: chapter 4).

This article seeks to understand when legitimacy crises, in fact, lead to IO decline. It does so through the case of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE has faced multiple crises over the past decade, including Russia and other post-Soviet states contesting its liberal mission, competition from other IOs reducing its political relevance, and above all the Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the war against Ukraine in 2022. The OSCE is therefore engulfed by a polycrisis in which its “right to rule” and role as a security community-building institution are fundamentally questioned. This has had clear consequences. In April 2022, for instance, the OSCE was forced to close the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine, its largest field operation with a staff of 1,300 and a budget of 108 million euros (Liechtenstein 2021; International Crisis Group 2022). At the time of writing, in September 2023, the OSCE was so gridlocked that it had not been able to adopt a budget for 2022 and 2023 and that it could not agree on leadership positions, such as the Chairman-in-Office and the Secretary-General, for 2024 (Liechtenstein 2023). The OSCE is therefore clearly in decline and the immediate future seems to particularly bleak with its very existence in jeopardy.

The decline of the OSCE thus warrants explanation. This article contributes to the literature on IO legitimacy by seeking to understand why the OSCE failed to (re)legitimize. Drawing on twenty interviews with senior national and OSCE officials and a thorough document analysis, the central argument is two-fold. First, while some IOs will engage in high-intensity (re)legitimation practices, not all IOs are able to do so. Since 2014, the institutional actors of the OSCE have been unable to engage due to institutional weaknesses and impeded leadership. Despite its considerable size, the OSCE is a relatively decentralized organization reliant on field missions. The central secretariat in Vienna lacks the most basic autonomy from the membership and is subject to an annual budgetary cycle that is highly vulnerable to hijacking. Political leadership is also with the rotating Chairman-in-Office instead of the Secretary-General. (Re)legitimation attempts by the OSCE have thus been quite muted. Second, the heterogeneous and largely zero-sum preferences of the participating states have made them unwilling audiences for (re)legitimation practices.¹ Long-term Russian efforts to revise the principles of the European security architecture and Western neglect of the OSCE have led to polarization on the remedies for the organization’s legitimacy crisis. As a result, legitimation practices aimed at persuading some will inevitably alienate others.

This article makes three contributions. First, as noted, it contributes to the emerging literature on IO legitimacy and the legitimation and delegitimation practices of state and non-state actors (e.g., Zaum 2013; Tallberg, Bäckstrand, Scholte 2018; Tallberg and Zürn 2019; Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin 2022; Lenz and Söderbaum 2023; Schmittke et al. 2023; Uhlin and Verhaegen 2023). It shows that scholars need to pay more attention to the conditions under which actors can actually engage in such practices. For IOs, the

¹For legal reasons, the OSCE does not have “member states” but “participating states.” The OSCE can nonetheless be considered an IO according to all conventional definitions, and this article considers the participating states as if they were member states.

constitution of the secretariat and the potential for political leadership are clearly important. Second, the study of the OSCE provides us with a better understanding of the potential consequences of legitimacy crises (Sommerer et al. 2022). In particular, IO decline as an outcome of legitimacy crises remains understudied. The OSCE is a clear case of both absolute decline—loss of budget, policy scope, and policy output—and relative decline—loss of centrality in international relations (Debre and Dijkstra 2023). Finally, the article contributes to our empirical knowledge about the OSCE, a vastly under-researched IO. The few extant accounts on the crisis of the OSCE focus on the normative conflict between Russia and the West (Peters 2013; Boerzel and Peters 2019), a wider lack of compliance with liberal commitments (see Friesendorf 2020), and weak operational implementation of its mediation strategies (Remler et al. 2020; Guliyev and Gawrich 2021).

These arguments are persecuted as follows. The first section introduces the key concepts and develops a theoretical framework for legitimacy crises and decline. The second section examines the nature of the OSCE’s legitimacy crisis, discusses the OSCE’s institutional characteristics, traces and explains its discursive and behavioral legitimation practices, and demonstrates the organization’s decline. In doing so, the article contributes to a better understanding of the historical and contemporary sources of the OSCE’s crisis and nuances wider theoretical debates on legitimation and IOs in crisis.

Legitimacy Crises, Legitimation Practices, and IO Decline

The OSCE has been severely challenged by several of its participating states; it has faced competition from other IOs, reducing its political relevance; and the Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2014, but particularly in 2022, has caused gridlock. For the OSCE, there is an urgent question of whether it still fits purpose and whether it still has legitimacy—and the corresponding right to exercise authority—in the broader European security architecture. While other contested IOs have resorted to (re)legitimation practices and other strategic responses, the OSCE has failed to legitimize. It is, in effect, clearly in decline. This section discusses the academic literature on IO legitimacy crises and clarifies when IOs may fail to legitimize. It starts off by defining the key concepts and elaborates how legitimacy crises potentially relate to decline. Subsequently, it discusses IO legitimacy, intensity, and the ability of IOs to respond. It concludes by considering the preferences of member states, or in the case of the OSCE participating states, on the remedies for the legitimacy crisis.

Legitimacy Crises and the Pathway to Decline

In the context of IOs, legitimacy refers to the “generalized perception that [their] normative precepts are rightful, that they warrant respect and compliance for more than self-interested reasons, for reasons of their normative standing” (Reus-Smit 2007: 158; cf. Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 585 for a similar sociological definition of legitimacy linking an actor’s exercise of authority to audience beliefs of appropriateness). In short, legitimacy of IOs is often considered as in the “right to rule” by relevant stakeholders, such as the member states (Binder and Heupel 2015; Tallberg and Zürn 2019). Legitimacy is crucial for IOs, which often lack the coercive enforcement mechanisms of domestic institutions, in en-

suring compliance with their norms and rules (Dingwerth, Schmidtke, and Weise 2020). Indeed, the OSCE is a norm-based organization that not only does not have enforcement powers but also only produces politically, not legally, binding commitments. As the OSCE is not based on a treaty but rather on a political constitutive charter, it formally also does not have member states. Instead, it relies on the input and support of the fifty-seven participating states, which decide everything by consensus, including the budget and staffing of the organization.

Scholars have recently taken an interest in “legitimacy crises” within IOs. Reus-Smit (2007) notes, in this respect, that “[w]hen we say that an actor or institution is suffering a crisis of legitimacy, we are saying that the decline in its legitimacy, or its failure to cultivate sufficient legitimacy, has reached a *critical turning point* [emphasis added]” (166–7). Such a critical turning point for an IO takes place when there is a disconnect between the exercise of authority by IOs and what the key stakeholders consider appropriate (Sommerer et al. 2022: 25–26). In other words, key stakeholders—principally the member states—start to question the IO’s right to rule and do so in ways that are considered extreme compared to other moments in time (Sommerer et al. 2022). When faced with a legitimacy crisis, there are two potential responses of IOs (Reus-Smit 2007: 167; see also Lenz and Viola 2017: 957; Sommerer et al. 2022: 6). First, IOs can try to reconstitute the social basis of their legitimacy, including through engaging in (re)legitimation practices. Second, IOs can try to draw on other (material) sources of power and rule through coercion and bribery. In the absence of either form of organizational adaptation, IOs will likely “decline” (Reus-Smit 2007: 167). Legitimacy crises are therefore existential challenges for IOs, by definition, as they put “IOs at risk of no longer being able to effectively carry out some of their core functions” (Dijkstra et al. 2022: 3).

For some IOs, relying on other material sources of power is a viable option in the absence of a sufficient degree of legitimacy. They may have the backing of hegemonic supporters ready to whip the membership in line, or they may have institutional authority of their own. This does not generally go for the OSCE, which is heavily driven by its participating states. It makes it for the OSCE and similar IOs very important to sustain their legitimacy among the key stakeholders of the organization (“a given constituency or other relevant audience,” Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 585), which in the case of the OSCE mostly its participating states. In the absence of a proper response and (re)legitimation, Tallberg, Bäckstrand, and Scholte (2018: 17) note that legitimacy deficits or more intense forms of legitimacy crises can severely weaken an IO by reducing stakeholders’ willingness to engage in political discussions, pool resources, or comply with collective decisions. Thus, when member states consider an IO illegitimate, they may curtail its authority and resources, block the policy processes, or even withdraw membership. Alternatively, or in parallel, they may shift their attention to other institutions deemed more legitimate.

What form does IO decline take? While the spectre of institutional decline looms large over IOs as the liberal international order is increasingly contested (Zürn 2018; Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021), the literature lags behind as most institutionalist accounts either consider IOs stable and impervious to exogenous pressures or concentrate on the extreme case of the death and replacement of IOs (Cottrell 2009; Gray 2018; Debre and Dijkstra 2021; Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2021). Decline, however, delineates a distinct category on the spectrum spanning from stability to death.

While IO decline can merely be a precursor to the eventual death of an IO, decline can also lead to a new equilibrium in which the IO is weaker (but still functional) than in the *status quo ante*. Furthermore, as Gray (2018) has shown, various IOs can be classified as “zombies” in that they continue to survive but are no longer productive. IO decline as a potential outcome of legitimacy crises therefore deserves our attention.

When it comes to IO decline, Debre and Dijkstra (2023) usefully distinguish between absolute and relative forms of decline. In absolute and conventional terms, IO decline denotes the loss of authority, resources, member states, or policy output. For the OSCE, it is clear that it has been struggling to keep up with resources (both budget and staff) and that its policy output as measured, for instance, in terms of the number and size of field missions has notably dropped. This includes the closure of the SMM in Ukraine in 2022. However, the concept of relative decline is even more telling for the OSCE. It signifies that an IO is becoming less central to international relations. IOs may be less used, mentioned, or simply ignored over time and/or in comparison to other similar international institutions (see also Schuette 2022). When it comes to the European security architecture, the OSCE is decreasingly part of it.

The transition from legitimacy crises to IO decline is empirically not always easy to distinguish, but these are clearly two distinct analytical concepts. Legitimacy crises tend to manifest in continuous public criticism of the general features of the IO, not of specific policies, and repeated violations of key norms and principles, because of a disconnect between the IO’s exercise of authority and what stakeholders consider as appropriate. Decline ensues when these patterns translate into observable and sustained losses of resources, membership, policy scope and output, and a less central position in international relations (e.g., Sommerer et al. 2022; Debre and Dijkstra 2023). Furthermore, as noted above, legitimacy crises are not deterministic. Not all instances of continuous public criticism of IOs translate into absolute or relative decline. A key response can be adaptation, with IO actors trying to reconstitute the social basis of their legitimacy, including through (re)legitimation practices. IOs can therefore avert decline. In the OSCE, however, this has not happened. To understand why the OSCE has failed to (re)legitimate, it is important to consider (a) the sources of legitimation intensity and (b) the constellations of members and the potential to reconstitute the social basis of legitimacy.

IO Actors and (Re)legitimation Intensity

Legitimacy crises can be conceived as a “wake-up call” (Sommerer et al. 2022: 11) for institutional actors, which need not stand idly by but can actively engage in practices to (re)legitimize the IO’s authority in the eyes of its constituents (see also Agné and Söderbaum 2022). The substantive institutional features that form the basis of legitimacy judgments by the key IO stakeholders, particularly the member states, as well as the initial perception of the institutional features can be subject to change. Note that other actors, such as civil society or supportive member states, may also engage in (re)legitimation practices (see Gronau and Schmidtke 2016), but the focus here lies on those actors most likely to respond given that their fate is intrinsically bound up with that of the IO. These (re)legitimation practices can be discursive and aim at changing perceptions of given organizational features by intensifying their public communication and using value-laden symbols. Discursive

legitimation narratives tend to focus on either functional justifications—such as rational problem-solving capacity and welfare maximization—or normative justifications such as liberal norms of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law or communitarian norms such as shared history, identity, and sovereignty (see [Schmidtke et al. 2023](#)). Alternatively, legitimation practices can be behavioral and seek to reform the substantive features of the IO ([Gronau and Schmidtke 2016](#); [Tallberg and Zürn 2019](#)).² In general, the graver the crisis, the greater should be the legitimation efforts by institutional actors (for the wider debate on when IOs engage in legitimation, see, for example, [Zürn 2018](#) and [Schmidtke et al. 2023](#)).

Two factors endogenous to the IO shape how intensely institutional actors can engage in legitimation: the IO's institutional capacity and leadership. A recent body of institutionalist literature demonstrates that institutional actors frequently act strategically to fend off contestation (e.g., [Chorev 2012](#); [Gray 2018](#); [Debre and Dijkstra 2021](#); [Schuette 2021a, 2021b](#); [Hirschman 2021](#); [Dijkstra et al. 2022](#)). These insights on general responsiveness to crises are valid in the context of legitimation practices because the latter are specific forms of strategic crisis responses by institutional actors.

In contrast to passive responses of simply following orders, sitting out the crisis, or following an existing playbook, (re)legitimation practices are strategic in the sense that they are proactive and deliberately tailored to change constituent's perceptions of legitimacy ([Chorev 2012](#)). Thus, institutional actors require the strategic capacity to devise and then implement (re)legitimation practices. For IOs to devise a strategic response to legitimacy crisis in the first place, they need sufficient dedicated personnel, time, space, and resources, which [Bayerlein et al.](#) refer to as “cognitive slack” ([2020](#): 37–38). The size of the secretariat and the existence of a policy planning unit within it are the principal indicators for an IO's generalized strategic capacity ([Debre and Dijkstra 2021](#)). The autonomy of staff was also found to be a variable affecting the vitality of IOs ([Gray 2018](#)). Without such bureaucratic capacity and autonomy, IOs will merely be administrative bodies and unable to engage in legitimation.

To implement the devised legitimation practices, the IO needs specific attributes dependent on the type of practice. For discursive legitimation, IOs would profit from both a dedicated and well-resourced communications department as well as prominent leadership to be granted the media limelight. Behavioral legitimation is more difficult to achieve for IOs because it implies institutional changes. To do so, institutional actors need the formal and/or informal powers to set the agenda or even take decisions. Delegated competences ([Hooghe et al. 2017](#)), majority voting as opposed to consensus ([Scharpf 1988](#)), and imprecise mandates should render it more feasible for institutional actors to drive reforms. In addition to these formal institutional characteristics, strategic responses to legitimacy crises also require astute leadership by senior officials ([Hall and Woods 2018](#); [Schuette 2021a](#)). Leaders need to initially recognize the crisis of legitimacy, provide intellectual leadership in crafting responses, and then mobilize institutional resources to implement the responses. In doing so, they rely on their networks in capitals and other IOs as well as personal qualities such as communication skills, empathy, and diplomatic talent ([Boin, Stern, and Sundelius 2016](#); also

[Adler and Pouliot 2011](#)). In sum, institutional characteristics and leadership affect the intensity of (re)legitimation practices. Not all IOs have the same organizational abilities to pursue (re)legitimation when faced with legitimacy crises.

Extant accounts of discursive legitimation measure intensity by quantifying the share of IOs' public communications that aim at justifying their authority ([Schmidtke et al. 2023](#)). While this is a valuable approach, the quantitative focus neglects the actual quality of interventions, which can be assessed in small-n research. A qualitative focus directs attention not merely on the number of legitimation claims but on their effect on the desired audience. Audiences here include those stakeholders that are both critical and influential, such as dissatisfied member states, or electorates thereof, and relevant civil society actors. It matters, in other words, whether a legitimation claim is buried in an annual report or whether the Secretary-General promotes the IO in an interview with widely read international media. Discursive legitimation intensity, as conceived here, thus includes the quantity of legitimation claims, the quality of those interventions, and thus their effect, which can be assessed by, for instance, surveys on the prominence of an IO or expert judgment. In a similar vein, the quality of behavioral legitimation, including through institutional reforms, should be the main criterion to assess legitimation intensity. Indeed, [Zürn \(2018\)](#) shows that symbolic institutional reforms usually fail to avert decline, whereas instances of substantial reforms—such as the creation of the G20 or the reform of IMF voting rights—can deepen global governance (13, 17, chapter 6). Once again, meaningful political reforms of an IO are likely to be of greater impact than minute managerial changes.

(Re)legitimation and Constellations of Member States

As previously noted, the relationship between legitimacy crises and IO decline is not deterministic. Legitimacy crises do not automatically result in IO decline. But intense (re)legitimation practices also do not guarantee eventual (re)legitimation. The outcome of (re)legitimation practices is only partially in the hands of the IO institutional actors. After all, it is the audience of the legitimation practices—consisting of key stakeholders, oftentimes member states, with power over the fate of the IO—that ultimately needs to change their legitimacy judgments. For the OSCE, these are principally the participating states (cf. [Binder and Heupel 2015](#) on the UN). Can they be convinced of the remedies for the organization's legitimacy crisis? And to what extent do these audiences themselves, particularly the member states, play a role in the practices of IO legitimation and delegitimation?

IOs often bring together member states whose interests are neither mutually exclusive nor harmoniously in agreement ([Rittberger et al. 2019](#): 16). If state preferences fully align, then there is no need for an IO in the first place, as there are no coordination and compliance problems. If state preferences fully diverge, states will also disagree on creating and sustaining an IO. Many IOs, particularly collective security IOs such as the OSCE, which provide security among states that normally do not trust each other, are therefore positioned in a sweet spot between member states agreement and disagreement. This has consequences for the (re)legitimation practices of IOs. If the constellation of preferences remains reasonably homogenous, member states may broadly agree on the causes of and remedies for the IO's legitimacy crisis. Whether institutional actors can satisfy the resulting demands through (re)legitimation pref-

²Bexell, Jönsson, and Uhlin (2022) and others suggest a third category of institutional legitimation practices as “one subset of behavioral practice” (p. 31). We are, however, unsure that this adds analytical value, as structure (institutions) and agency (behavior) are normally considered distinct foci in social science. We therefore stick to the twofold discursive and behavioral practices.

ferences is not given, but reasonably homogenous views at least provide a potentially attainable objective to work toward (see Koschut 2016).

In contrast, heterogenous and diverging views on the IO's legitimacy crisis imply that states may prefer conflicting solutions. Heterogenous constellations place institutional actors in an "accommodation dilemma" (Jurado et al. 2022), in which satisfying one camp's demands may further undermine the IO's legitimacy in the eyes of the other opposing camp. It becomes thus zero-sum. The more polarized, the more difficult it is therefore for institutional actors (re)legitimize their authority. Indeed, growing heterogeneity among IO memberships increasingly characterizes both regional and global IOs. As the liberal international order spread and gained new members after the end of the Cold War, views on both the liberal content of most IOs and the level of decision-making became more diverse (Ikenberry 2020). Such diversity of views becomes particularly consequential in consensus-based IOs, such as the OSCE, where every member can wield a veto, and when powerful states are on opposing ends of the divide. There is ample literature on the influence powerful states directly exert in IOs (e.g., Stone 2011), and it should therefore not be expected that institutional actors in intergovernmental organizations would or could overtly contradict the core interests of veto players or even hegemony (Schuette 2021a). Constituents' perceptions of the IO are not necessarily fixed, however, and institutional actors may try to shape those as part of their legitimacy practices. In addition to the views among the IO's membership, in some cases there may also be other relevant actors, such as civil society, that can either support the legitimacy practices of the IO or, if in disagreement, launch counter legitimacy claims, which would make it more difficult for institutional actors to successfully legitimate their IO (Tallberg and Zürn 2019: 595–6).

It is not just whether member states can be made to see eye-to-eye on the remedies of a legitimacy crisis. They are also often active agents themselves in legitimation and delegitimation processes. They may engage in active delegitimation practices of their own, which may cause legitimacy crises in the first place, but also undermine (re)legitimation attempts by IO institutional actors. Furthermore, member states or groups of member states may explicitly target the institutional actors, for instance, by threatening or actually reducing their resources. IO bureaucracies and their political leaders may be "permeable," include "fiefdoms," and be unilaterally influenced (e.g., Hawkins and Jacoby 2008; Urpelainen 2012; Kleine 2013). In sum, the interplay of the two factors should explain when legitimation succeeds or fails. Success is likely when legitimation intensity is high and views among stakeholders on the remedies for the IO's legitimacy are crisis homogenous. Vice versa, failure is likely when legitimation is low and views are heterogeneous.

Methodology

This article uses the case study of the OSCE to clarify the pathway from legitimacy crises to IO decline. While many IOs have faced legitimacy crises, most have demonstrated resilience and relegitimated their rule. The OSCE is an exceptional case and may therefore help us to get a better understanding of why (re)legitimation may fail. The OSCE, as a case study, has three characteristics. First, the OSCE is a major IO of considerable size, yet its central organization and political leadership are weak by default. As such, more muted (re)legitimation practices are to be expected. Second, the OSCE participating states have heterogeneous and

largely zero-sum preferences, which have made them tough audiences for (re)legitimation practices. Third, the OSCE is one of the few major IOs currently in decline, both in absolute and relative terms. Studying the case of the OSCE against the framework supplied in this section therefore allows us insight into the interplay of what factors have proven critically important for responding to the legitimacy crisis.

The empirical section will largely chronologically trace the legitimacy crisis at the OSCE. The characterization of the nature of the OSCE's legitimacy crisis relies on historical analysis. The subsequent descriptive analysis examines the congruence between the OSCE's institutional characteristics and previously established necessary institutional features to engage in strategic behavior. The primary empirical section uses content analysis of public documents and speeches to evaluate discursive legitimation practices and trace behavioral responses. Finally, the article identifies indicators of decline and employs counterfactual thinking to evaluate the degree to which the failure to be legitimate is responsible for the OSCE's decline. The analysis is based on a triangulation of data gathered from twenty interviews with senior OSCE and national officials, analysis of speeches by the previous two Secretary Generals (SGs) and annual reports ($n = 83$), public documents, and secondary literature. The majority of interviews took place in Vienna in September 2021, therefore briefly before the Russian war against Ukraine in 2022, which has the advantage that interview data are not tainted by the problem of posthocism and the inevitability of OSCE's decline. Interviews were conducted with OSCE officials and national diplomats from a variety of participating states (see online appendix A1 for an overview).

Legitimacy Crises and Decline: The Case of the OSCE

This empirical section analyses why the OSCE has failed to relegitimize its rule and avert decline. It first discusses the nature of the OSCE's legitimacy crisis to show how participating states have diverged over time. Second, it analyses the OSCE's institutional weaknesses. Third, the section traces the discursive and behavioral legitimation failures. And fourth, it provides evidence of the OSCE's decline.

From Liberal Optimism to East-West Polarization

A product of the détente period of the Cold War, the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 established the Conference on Security and Cooperation, the predecessor of the OSCE, as a dialogue forum to alleviate the strains in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. In the Helsinki Decalogue, it enshrined ten principles that constitute the normative foundation of the OSCE to this day, including the inviolability of borders, peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for human rights. Following the end of the Cold War, the Paris Charter of 1990 affirmed and expanded the Helsinki Decalogue in reflection of the zeitgeist that the liberal model of democracy, market economy, international law, and human rights protection had prevailed. This was the phase of liberal optimism; the liberal international order expanded, and President Yeltsin ostensibly sought to take Russia on a path toward democracy and membership of the West (Ikenberry 2020: 255ff.).

The new cooperative spirit between the West and countries of the former Soviet Union led participating states to transform the CSCE into the OSCE in 1995 and expand its remit to become a security-building organization by actively promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of

law as guarantors for peace in Europe (Gawrich 2014). They created the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), with the mandate to observe elections in the OSCE's member states, advise governments on how to reform domestic institutions, and train officials in the then-new democracies. The OSCE Representative on the Freedom of the Media (RFoM) was set up to monitor the freedom of expression and of the media, while the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM) was created for the task of analyzing and making recommendations on how to address causes of ethnic tensions in the member states. Under the auspices of the Conflict Prevention Centre, the OSCE could now launch field operations to help the respective state meet its commitments, serve as the eyes and ears of the organization, and thus prevent conflict.

Throughout the 1990s, the post-Cold War consensus on the liberal foundations of the European security architecture held, and cooperation worked relatively successfully in the OSCE (Zellner 2020). However, from the late 1990s onward, the relations principally between Russia and the West deteriorated, with significant repercussions for the OSCE. While Moscow continued to support the OSCE in the abstract, it grew increasingly critical, particularly of the OSCE's missions to promote free elections and the rule of law. For the administration led by President Putin from 1999 onward, these activities constituted illegitimate interferences in the sovereign realm of the member states rather than core tasks of the organization (Kropatcheva 2015). Indeed, Russia and its allies increasingly pushed back against the liberal democratic foundation of the OSCE (e.g., Libman and Obydenkova 2018). In the 2000s, these concerns were buoyed by disagreements over NATO and EU enlargement, autocratic restoration in Russia, and color revolutions in several former Communist states. In line with his crystallizing belligerent anti-Westernism, first explicitly espoused during his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin increasingly viewed the OSCE as a "western agent" (Kropatcheva 2015). Meanwhile, the United States and its allies increasingly preferred working through NATO and the EU at the expense of the OSCE, disappointing Russia, which is not a member of either organization.

Then Russian President Medvedev demanded in 2008 to renegotiate the very foundation of the European security system, and with it the OSCE. His proposal of a European Security Treaty included a call for transforming the OSCE into a "fully fledged regional organization" endowed with a legal personality (Steinbrueck Platise and Peters 2019). At the heart of the Russian proposal were, first, a return to the traditional noninterference principle by curtailing the autonomy of the OSCE's institutions and, second, the elevation of the role of Russia in European security affairs by shifting decision-making away from NATO and the EU to an organization where Russia was represented. While the Western states signaled willingness to discuss some modest reforms of the OSCE, neither the United States nor key European members like Germany were willing to renegotiate the liberal foundations of the OSCE, and hence, to Russian frustration, the reform efforts petered out (Peters 2013: 203–6). The Medvedev proposal can be identified as the start of the legitimacy crisis at the OSCE, since these plans potentially put the core functions of the OSCE at risk.

By the mid-2010s, relations broadly between those OSCE participating states which are members of the EU and NATO, and those that are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) had reached a new nadir (Hill 2018; Zellner 2020). Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine from 2014 onward as well as

its military attack in 2022 challenged the most basic principle of the OSCE, the inviolability of borders in Europe, which was the foundation of the Helsinki Accords of 1975. The annexation therefore widened and deepened the legitimacy crisis at the OSCE. Arms control negotiations have consequently been a collateral of the growing polarization among the OSCE states; the Vienna Document on confidence and security building measures was not duly updated in 2016 as originally envisaged, Russia withdrew from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, and both the United States and Russia withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty in 2020 and 2021, respectively.

Other CIS states also openly violate key OSCE norms, further reducing the legitimacy of the OSCE. In their conflict over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan respect the OSCE's norms on peaceful conflict resolution. Democratic backsliding across the CIS region has also fueled opposition to the autonomy of the OSCE's three institutions. ODIHR has come under increasing diplomatic pressure. Russia and its allies have used several strategies to subjugate ODIHR, including demanding a veto over its election reporting, curtailing its budget, and inviting rival election observers from the CIS or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to challenge ODIHR's primacy (Interviews #10, #12, and #13; also see Cooley and Nexon 2020, Donno 2024). In 2020, Tajikistan and Turkey also blocked the renewal of ODIHR's director mandate, while Azerbaijan and Tajikistan blocked the extension of the RFoM, citing excessive criticism of the domestic media landscape (Brzozowski 2020). This resulted in an institutional leadership crisis, as the four senior posts of the OSCE (also the positions of the SG and HCNM) remained vacant for four months. In another example of its contestation, ODIHR decided not to send observers to the 2021 Duma elections following Russian insistence to limit the number of observers and thus effectively impair the ability to objectively assess the elections.

As the embodiment of the short-lived post-Cold War consensus on the terms and arrangements of the European security order, the OSCE is now engulfed in a severe crisis of legitimacy (see Boerzel and Peters 2019; Krastev and Holmes 2019). On the one hand, Russia and its CIS allies (as well as Turkey in part) have sought to revise the very normative foundation on which the organization is built and actively subvert its liberal missions, including through all sorts of delegitimation practices. For them, the OSCE has become an instrument of Western policy (see Karaganov 2015), and they increasingly rely on authoritarian organizations that overlap with the OSCE, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Collective Security Treaty Organisation. On the other hand, while many Western states continue to profess their support for the organization and defend the OSCE's liberal foundation, they increasingly look to the EU and NATO and thereby marginalize the OSCE (Panke and Stapel 2018; Hafel and Lenz 2022). Thus, the OSCE finds itself in a protracted dilemma in which one camp contests the very norms of the organization that the other camp values, which in turn undermines its ability to act as an effective guarantor of peace. High preference heterogeneity therefore characterizes the OSCE's participating states.

The legitimacy of the OSCE was therefore already very contested prior to the fully fledged attack by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022, but the situation has exponentially worsened since. The large SMM in Ukraine closed in April 2022. Under the leadership of the hawkish Polish rotating Chairman-in-Office, Western states in the OSCE de-

clared that there could be “no business as usual” in dealing with Russia, thereby effectively blocking cooperation. At the time of writing, in July 2023, the OSCE was so gridlocked that it had not been able to adopt a budget for 2022 and 2023, relying rather on the roll-over of the 2021 budget without inflation correction (Lichtenstein 2023). There has been no decision on which country will act as the Chairman-in-Office in 2024, and all four OSCE leadership positions—including Secretary-General and ODIHR—are set to expire in December 2023, as are the mandates for the field missions.

The Design of the OSCE: An Institutionalized Process Rather Than an Organization

The legitimacy crisis of the OSCE is therefore severe, and it would have been tough for any IO to devise and implement an effective (re)legitimation strategy. Nonetheless, it is important to discuss the OSCE’s institutional design, which is fundamentally weak, to better understand how this hampered OSCE actors in their (re)legitimation strategies. The OSCE is an intergovernmental organization. Lacking a constitutive legal treaty and legal personality, it remains a cooperative institution based on a political agreement that cannot issue legally binding rules (Steinbrueck Platise and Peters 2019). Indeed, the OSCE has no means of enforcing commitments and hence relies on the goodwill among its participating states. The OSCE’s mandate is set out in a series of documents, including the Helsinki Final Act (1975), the Paris Charter (1990), and the summit declarations of Helsinki (1992) and Budapest (1994).

At its core, the OSCE is an intergovernmental forum for security cooperation in Europe. Accordingly, the main decision-making bodies consist of participating states’ representatives, and consensus requirements remain true. The Summit of heads of state or government is the highest body that meets irregularly (the last time in 2010) to set the political direction. Annual meetings of foreign ministers in the Ministerial Council function as the main decision-making organ. In turn, the Permanent Council, composed of ambassadors, meets weekly in Vienna to decide on the day-to-day business of the organization. The most powerful position in the OSCE, however, is, as previously noted, the Chairperson-in-Office (Nünlist 2017). This annually rotating position is held by the foreign minister of the respective chair and is imbued with agenda-setting powers and political responsibilities for coordinating decision-making. The OSCE’s executive structures include the secretariat as well as the three institutions, the latter of which enjoy significant autonomy both from member states as well as the secretariat (Zannier 2018). ODIHR has the power to publish their election observation reports as well as their preliminary findings without requiring approval by the participating states (see Donno 2024: 3). In a similar vein, the RoFMs can independently publish their reports on the quality of freedom of expression in participating states. In addition, the OSCE’s field operations help implement OSCE commitments to prevent and resolve conflicts. They are formally accountable to the Chairman-in-Office and the Permanent Council, while the secretariat offers merely administrative support. Indeed, this fragmentation of authority and particularly the decentralized nature of the OSCE regularly leads to coordination issues and “turf wars” (Interviews #10 and #15) between the secretariat and the institutions and field missions.

The OSCE’s secretariat should be the central actor in engaging in (re)legitimation practices. To do so, however, it requires cognitive slack, prominent leadership, formal and in-

formal powers, and communicative capacities. The position of the Secretary-General as the head of the secretariat is crucial for the organization’s capacity to act strategically. However, compared to other intergovernmental security organizations like NATO, the OSCE’s Secretary-General is institutionally weak. Defined by a dozen Ministerial Council decisions (Greminger 2021: 42), the mandate includes largely administrative and only some limited diplomatic tasks. Principally, the Secretary-General acts as the Chief Administrative Officer in charge of the effective use of human and financial resources. She/he also supports and represents the Chairman-in-Office and serves as the institutional memory of the OSCE across chairpersonships. De facto, the room for manoeuvre of the Secretary-General is thus determined by the respective Chairman-in-Office. Unlike the Secretaries-General of NATO or the UN, the OSCE Secretary-General merely delivers a report on his/her activities during the weekly meetings of the Permanent Council but has no agenda-setting powers in the decision-making bodies (Knill, Eckhardt, and Grohs 2016: 1062). The Secretary-General also has no formal control over the three institutions or the field missions, which is a key structural weakness. In contrast to NATO, where the current and previous Secretaries-General were former prime ministers, OSCE Secretaries-General have usually been diplomats. Lamberto Zannier, Secretary-General between 2011 and 2017, was an Italian career-diplomat before taking up his post at the OSCE. His successor, Thomas Greminger (2017–2020), was a Swiss diplomat and, among others, ambassador to the OSCE. Current Secretary-General Helga Schmid (2020–present), also a former German diplomat, is perhaps a bit more prominent, having previously been the Secretary-General of the EU’s External Action Service. This norm is also indicative of states’ unwillingness to endow the position of Secretary-General with greater diplomatic prowess, as former ministers or heads of state or government tend to view themselves as equals rather than servants of what previously were colleagues (Boin, Stern, and Sundelius 2016).

Beyond the position of the Secretary-General, the OSCE’s secretariat is relatively sizeable, consisting of around 400 staff in Vienna, though almost 3,000 staff work in field operations. However, the organization’s human resource policy renders it difficult to attract and retain high-quality staff, which is a key factor in shaping an organization’s vitality (Gray 2018), and many vacancies remain unfilled (Greminger 2021: 37). As a noncareer organization, the OSCE has strict term limits on service for its officials. Combined with the heavy reliance on seconded staff, this policy has led to high staff fluctuation, which in turn undermines institutional memory, expertise-building, and policy continuity (Zannier 2018: 47; also Knill, Eckhardt, and Grohs 2016). In part to counter these trends, it was only in 2017 that Secretary-General Greminger created the Strategic Policy Support Unit (SPSU) with five staff members to offer medium- and long-term strategic capacity. The secretariat does include a communications department, but it lacks sufficient human and financial resources to raise sustained attention in the capitals and among the publics, with the staff size of thirteen people not having changed in two decades (Greminger 2021: 41). Furthermore, since the budget cycle is annual, extensive delays in passing the budget are common as states frequently use their veto powers to “hostage-take” (Interview #10) the process to obtain concessions on unrelated subject matters.

In sum, the OSCE suffers from “deliberately fabricated institutional weakness” (Zellner 2020: 15) and a “leadership vacuum by design” (Interview #12), with the result that the

OSCE today is “all about internal not external crisis management” (Interview #20). The position of the Secretary-General is institutionally weak, which is exacerbated by the norm to appoint seasoned diplomats, not political heavyweights. Moreover, the executive structure is fragmented, which undermines collective action. While the secretariat now has some strategic planning capacity, it suffers from staff shortages and turnover, as well as under-resourced communications department. The annual, consensus-based budget cycle not only hampers the efficient functioning of the secretariat but also invites blackmailing and issue linkages by participating states. Hence, [Bauer and Ege \(2016: 1031\)](#) find that, in comparison to fourteen other IOs, the OSCE secretariat ranks as the least autonomous. As little more than a servile instrument of the participating states, the organization should, according to the theoretical model, thus struggle to engage in high-intensity legitimization efforts.

The OSCE's Discursive Legitimation Practices

So given the significant legitimacy crisis at the OSCE, and the relatively weak position of the OSCE institutional actors, what (re)legitimation practices has the OSCE pursued? It is worth to stay with studying the OSCE's discursive (re)legitimation practices. IO representatives can proactively use value-laden public communications to justify the organization's identity and purpose, thus aiming to change the perception among critical member states of the institutional features. Even formally weak actors can use the public realm to shape policy outcomes ([Schuette 2021a](#)). These discursive legitimization practices can be observed in the IO's public documents, like annual reports or speeches and interviews by senior officials, usually the Secretary-General as the de facto spokesperson of the organization. Hence, the following section analyses OSCE annual reports ($n = 7$) and all speeches by SGs Zannier ($n = 28$) and Greminger ($n = 48$) since 2014 as listed on the OSCE website, secondary literature, and interview data to establish the quantity, quality, and effect of the OSCE's discursive legitimization practices (see online appendix for primary sources).

The mere quantity of legitimization claims by the OSCE is high. [Schmidtke et al. \(2023\)](#) even find in a comparative analysis of twenty-eight IO that none made proportionally as many legitimization claims as the OSCE. Indeed, an analysis of the annual reports since 2014 affirms that the organization regularly rehearses well-known principles of “inclusivity,” “platform for dialogue,” and “protection of human rights [and] media freedoms” (OSCE 2014) or whose relevance “has never been more apparent to prevent crises from turning into conflicts, to confront transnational challenges, and to seize opportunities for co-operation” (OSCE 2017), including the essential role played by the SMM in Ukraine until 2022. While the most likely part of the reports for legitimization claims to feature are the “Messages from the Secretary General,” these introductory remarks tend to shy away from using any value-laden language and symbols or establishing new narratives to justify the continued existence of the organization. Indeed, the legitimization claims tend to be ritualistic and are buried amid lists of the OSCE's activities.

The public interventions by Secretaries-General Zannier and Greminger broadly reflect the recourse to general values of the OSCE. In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine, Zannier's speeches emphasize that the OSCE reacted flexibly and rapidly to the crisis, among others, by rapidly establishing the SMM (Zannier #2). But beyond this functional justification for the OSCE's existence, Zannier does not

engage with liberal or communitarian legitimization claims, merely noting how the growing east-west polarization undermines the OSCE's problem-solving capacity (Zannier #25). Greminger's interventions also demonstrate his awareness of the deep normative conflict among the OSCE's participating states. Like Zannier, he minimizes references to the normative underpinnings of the organization, instead focusing on what he calls “islands of operation” and a “positive unifying agenda” (Greminger #10, also #17, #42, and #46). In doing so, however, Greminger met with fierce resistance from numerous western participating states, which feared that focusing more on transnational issues would dilute the human and political-military dimensions, and thus normalize the violation of key OSCE norms by Russia (Interviews #11, #15, and #17).

Hence, while the quantity of legitimization claims is notable, their quality and thus impact are questionable. The OSCE's Secretaries-General tend to remain very cautious in their interventions. One former official noted that the OSCE's public communications were hamstrung by its “inclusivity” and the “need to always speak on behalf of all participating states” (Interview #19). Indeed, the Secretary-General does not have a formal communication mandate but only a limited information mandate that tightly constrains the Secretary-General's ability to communicate proactively and autonomously. It is thus usually the Chairman-in-Office, who is a foreign minister, that shapes the public image of the organization. Moreover, the communications department is underfunded, and Secretaries-General, as career diplomats, do not tend to be well-known to generate much media attention. As a result, the OSCE's legitimization claims had little impact. While the organization is well-known and reputable in those states where it has field missions, its public prominence elsewhere remains low, as is recognized by both [Greminger \(2021: 41\)](#) and [Zannier \(2018: 48\)](#). Based on data from speeches at the UN General Assembly, [Debre and Dijkstra \(2023: 26\)](#) corroborate this view by showing that since the 2000s national leaders have paid ever less political attention to the OSCE. One OSCE official goes as far as to identify a “crisis of visibility” both among the public and in most capitals (Interview #15).

In sum, the intensity of the OSCE's discursive legitimization practices remained moderately low. While it made many claims in the annual reports, the Secretaries-General themselves had to err on the side of caution and hardly promoted the organization in public. The institutional constraints—a lack of a communications mandate and resources—were compounded by the normative heterogeneity among states. The original liberal values that the participating states west of Vienna still largely subscribe to are anathema to the communitarian vision propagated by the CIS states. Any kind of normative legitimization by the OSCE institutional actors would have produced a substantial backlash by the opposing camp.

The OSCE's Behavioral Legitimation Practices

The more tangible approach to legitimize its right to rule is for an organization to reform its substantive features to alleviate criticism among member states. The following section therefore analyses the institutional reforms undertaken under the Secretaries-General Zannier and Greminger.

Zannier initiated two institutional reforms. In 2011, he led efforts to create the “OSCE Network” of think tanks and academic institutions. This epistemic community provides policy expertise on subjects relevant to the OSCE policy fields and serves to partially offset the lack of strategic

capacity and expertise resulting from the secretariat's constrained resources (Interview #19; see also [Knill, Eckhardt, and Grohs 2016](#): 1065).³ In addition, Zannier launched the Security Days in 2012, which convened a wide array of stakeholders to engage in informal dialogue on pertinent subjects. Topics hitherto discussed are wide-ranging and include both traditional and emerging concerns of the organizations, including military confidence-building, gender and conflict, the climate-security nexus, or violent extremism. Security Days were thus intended to circumvent formal fora that were largely blocked and set the agenda in order to generate new ideas for the OSCE's traditional roles and showcase its potential to play a meaningful role in emerging issues ([Zannier 2018](#): 36; Interview #4). Given that both reforms predate the annexation of Crimea in 2014, they aimed at generating new ideas about the general functioning of the OSCE rather than responding directly to the legitimacy crisis. In addition, these outreach initiatives remain small-scale compared to, for instance, the involvement of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Conferences of the Parties (COPs) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

While Zannier was considered a cautious administrator in thrall of the participating states, Secretary-General Greminger aimed to be a more proactive and influential leader. Upon coming into office, he set out on an ambitious institutional reform agenda. Among the first decisions of his tenure was to create the SPSU. In his previous post as Swiss OSCE Ambassador in 2014, Greminger had noted that the secretariat was completely absorbed in daily files and lacked a central structure tasked with crafting medium- and long-term strategy ([Greminger 2021](#): 25). Faced with opposition from some participating states, Greminger had to rely on extrabudgetary funding to attract five officials seconded from key participating states. The unit was subsequently involved in developing regional strategies for Central Asia or the Western Balkans and helped draft the policy priorities for the Slovak and Albanian chairpersonships (Interview #5). As such, establishing the policy unit was an attempt to increase the autonomy and functional capacity of the secretariat (Interviews #11 and #17).

The SPSU also played a central role in drafting the ambitious Fit4Purpose reform agenda to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the OSCE. In February 2018, Greminger presented a ten-point plan to reform the OSCE, which consisted of both managerial and political changes. The secretariat had not been reformed since its creation in 1995, and many structures and procedures lacked basic digitalization. A management review identified eighty necessary optimization measures, sixty-eight of which were completed by 2020, including a new travel management tool or electronic recruitment platform (see [Greminger 2021](#): 32ff.). In addition to these technical reforms, the Secretary-General also proposed political changes. Most importantly, he advocated to change the budgetary cycle by moving from an annual to a bi-annual budget. The existing one-year budget had severely undermined the functioning of the organization, as a substantial amount of time had to be invested every year merely to get the budget passed. As a result, the OSCE regularly operates under provisional budgets that prevent it from launching new projects ([Liechtenstein 2021](#)). The annual cycle also invites participating states to use the power of the veto to heap political pressure on the secretariat and institutions and prevents longer-term strategic planning. In

an attempt to boost the capacity of the secretariat and the institutions, Greminger also suggested to revise the staffing rules by extending the maximum duration of service both for officials and directors, as well as offering the possibility to return to the organization after a cooling-off period.

However, both potentially consequential reforms failed to materialize. Yet again, the hurdle of consensus requirements was too high for institutional reforms. Several interviewees, however, also noted that beyond the weak institutional authority of his position, Greminger himself lacked the necessary political access in capitals and was insufficiently transparent and consultative about his political reforms, both vis-à-vis participating states and other institutions (Interviews #12, #14, and #18). Reflecting the fragmentation of the OSCE, there was a widespread suspicion among officials in the institutions that Greminger's agenda was motivated less by efficiency concerns and more by a desire to "centralize power" (Interview #20).

Like many observers of the OSCE, Greminger also observed that the formal dialogue fora, such as the Permanent Council and the Forum for Security Cooperation, had mutated into arenas where participating states merely confronted each other with prepared allegations at the cost of open deliberation (Interview #3, [Greminger 2021](#): 25ff.). Complementing the existing Security Days, Greminger therefore devised the Talking Points series with renowned experts to stimulate informal debate. To generate ideas about how to navigate the trade-off between demonstrating relevance and diluting core tasks inherent in Greminger's attempts to focus on islands of cooperation, he helped launch the Cooperative Security Initiative (Interview #11). Both of these initiatives did not require consensus among participating states (Interview #3). Like Zannier before him, Greminger therefore used epistemic community-building to try to legitimize the OSCE's functional role.

In sum, the OSCE has hardly undergone any substantial institutional reforms since 2014, despite the deep structural changes engulfing it. Greminger did succeed in making technical changes to the workings of the secretariat but largely failed to enact any of the more political reforms that required support by the participating states with the exception of the creation of the SPSU. The only meaningful reform—the creation of the Structured Dialogue to revive arms control talks—was initiated by the German chairpersonship in 2016, not the secretariat. It is also noteworthy that both Zannier's and Greminger's proposals exclusively addressed functional rather than normative sources of legitimation—making the organization work more effectively, echoing the findings on discursive legitimation practices. Given the weakness of both the secretariat and the office of the Secretary-General, as well as the lack of political clout of Zannier and Greminger, these weak legitimation attempts are hardly surprising. Without any agenda-setting, not to mention decision-making powers, the OSCE lacks, as one interviewee notes, "an institutional driving force for reforms" (Interview #6). Thus, the OSCE secretariat finds itself in a vicious cycle; to devise and drive necessary reforms, it needs reforming in the first place.

The OSCE in Decline

Faced with a considerable legitimacy crisis, which has gradually deepened since the early 2000s and particularly the 2010s, the OSCE has hitherto failed to (re)legitimize its authority as a security community builder. The intensity of

³For disclosure, the authors' home institution is also a member of the OSCE Network.

its (re)legitimation practices has remained low. Successive public interventions by the Secretary-General have flown beneath the public radar, the and most substantial institutional reform efforts have failed because of the minimal political clout and institutional levers of influence of senior officials to propel reforms. At the same time, the preferences among its participating states on the crisis and future of the OSCE are highly heterogeneous, and hence, very difficult to satisfy. In an increasing zero-sum game environment, (re)legitimation has been an uphill battle. Key supporters of the OSCE have also been few, with Germany and neutral Austria, Finland, and Switzerland often having to take the initiatives and pick up the bill through extrabudgetary contributions.

The lack of sufficient (re)legitimation practices has resulted in an outcome where the OSCE is not just stuck to the status quo and has become increasingly gridlocked, but is also in decline (cf. [Reus-Smit 2007: 167](#)). The OSCE has witnessed a clear reduction in the willingness, mostly by its participating states, to engage in political discussions, pool resources, or comply with collective decisions. This comes from Russia and other CIS states no longer being willing to host field missions or welcome election monitors, eroding other liberal norms, and obstructing political and budgetary processes in Vienna. But equally, Western states have given less-and-less priority to the OSCE as opposed to other institutions such as the EU, often not pushing back against delegitimation attempts of the organization.

So how does decline precisely look like in the case of the OSCE? First, the most evident expression of participating states' lack of diffuse support for the organization is its loss of budget. Whereas in 2000, the nominal unified budget amounted to EUR 209 million, by 2021 it had been reduced to EUR 138 million (though this excluded the budget of the SMM of around EUR 108 million). Given that the 2022 and 2023 budgets have not been adopted, the OSCE operates on a monthly rollover budget, not compensating for the considerable inflation across the OSCE countries. OSCE officials note that the budgetary pressures on both the secretariat and ODIHR are "completely unsustainable" (Interviews #10, also #16, #18, and #20). At ODIHR, the staff-to-non-staff cost ratio has reached 80:20, with the result that the institution must selectively observe elections, thereby inviting criticism of a Western bias, especially by participating states east of Vienna. In the secretariat, the budgetary pressures significantly limit regular trips to the field missions by senior officials, aggravating the fragmentation among OSCE institutions (Interview #18).

Second, the policy scope has, de facto, shrunk. While the OSCE is nominally charged with tasks reaching from arms control and military confidence building (first dimension), economic and environmental issues (second dimension), and human rights policy and democracy promotion (third dimension), peripheral issues dominate its agenda, as almost all sensitive files are blocked by participating states ([Zellner 2020](#)). The crown jewel of the OSCE—the SMM—was forced to close in April 2022 after Russia vetoed its extension. The OSCE has also struggled to adapt to emerging security threats arising from climate change or new technologies (Interview #14). Third, and accordingly, the policy output has reduced. No summit of heads of state and government has taken place since 2010, and the annual ministerial councils rarely produce substantive decisions. In 2020, the combination of opposition by some member states and indifference by others culminated in the leadership crisis of 2020 and rendered the organization rudderless and im-

potent for four months, when the four most senior institutional positions, including that of the SG, remained vacant. This will likely be repeated at the beginning of 2024 with a lack of consensus on appointments. Moreover, the organization's signature annual conferences—the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM) and the Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC)—are under pressure. Following postponement due to the pandemic in 2020, for the first time in its history, HDIM did not take place in 2021 after opposition from Russia. The ASRC, in turn, took place in 2021, later than envisaged by its mandate and in a pro-forma fashion, after disputes over its agenda. And fourth, political attention among participating states toward the OSCE has been shifting to other IOs like the EU and NATO, but also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which have expanded their domains at the expense of the OSCE ([Cooley and Nexon 2020: 118ff.](#), [Donno 2024](#)).

In other words, in the case of the OSCE, absolute decline manifests itself in (a) a reduced policy scope, (b) less high-level meetings between the participating states and with other relevant actors and less output, (c) vacant leadership positions and insufficient administrative budget, and (d) selective and closed field operations and missions. Also, in terms of relative decline, we can observe important developments, including (e) less political buy-in and attention by key participating states and (f) more interest in competing international institutions. What we have not seen in the OSCE is the withdrawal of participating states, even if the withdrawal, suspension, and/or expulsion of Russia have been repeatedly mentioned throughout 2022 (by Russia itself and also by Western states).

Critics might question whether even high-intensity legitimation practices could have averted the OSCE's decline, given the severe acrimony among participating states. Indeed, it would be unreasonable to suggest that a stronger OSCE alone could have thawed relations between Russia and the West, pacified the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, or resolved normative conflicts between liberal democratic and authoritarian participating states. But through stronger (re)legitimation practices, the institutional actors could have still taken a number of practical steps toward protecting the organization. Foremost, an OSCE with a reformed budgetary process and staffing rules could have been more strategic in positioning itself as an avant-garde in those transnational issue areas in which participating states continue to share basic interests. From China's increasing advances into OSCE territory through the Belt and Road Initiative, to the security implications of climate change, to emerging technologies, the OSCE has largely failed to tackle key issues because it has been bogged down in internal matters (Interview #14; see [Bayok and Wolff 2022](#)). Demonstrating its added value on such transnational issues would have created incentives for Russia to compartmentalize the OSCE (to preserve those functions it values) rather than attack the organization outright.

In addition, as conceded by Secretary-General [Greminger \(2021: 41\)](#), a more effective public messaging and outreach campaigns could have created greater awareness among the public, drew more attention among experts, and most importantly, generated much-needed interest in capitals. Budgetary reforms would have also improved the practical workings on conflict prevention that are currently under heavy financial pressure (Interview #18) and allowed ODIHR to keep the pressure on authoritarian states by maintaining its comprehensive election observation missions and hold-

ing HDIM (Interview #10), thereby creating greater political buy-in from western states. In combination, these incremental reforms would have the potential to demonstrate sufficiently the practical relevance of the OSCE in European security to both sides of the divide to avert the decline of the organization.

While the OSCE was in a bad shape already prior to 2022, the Russian war against Ukraine has made a (re)legitimation of the organization all but impossible. Throughout 2022, the OSCE has gone into survival mode, drawing parallels with the doomed League of Nations in the 1930s (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni 2022). This continues to date. The actual survival of the OSCE is at stake with many key decisions to be made before 2024. If the organization stays without its leadership and is forced to close further field operations, it will soon become a zombie-type IO (cf. Gray 2018). Even in a more optimistic scenario, the OSCE will certainly be less relevant to international relations and the European security architecture.

Conclusion

The Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 and the concomitant closure of the SMM may turn out to be the final nail in the coffin of the OSCE's relevance to European security. This article sets out to explain the OSCE's decline by analyzing why it has failed to (re)legitimize its role as a security community-building institution. The case study of the OSCE is important, as it runs counter to much of the academic insights on the resilience of IOs and their often effective (re)legitimation strategies. This article has focused on the intensity of legitimation practices and the views among key member states of the IO as the two key explanatory factors for failed or successful legitimation by institutional actors. Indeed, institutional weaknesses such as a powerless Secretary-General, fragmented institutions, and a lack of autonomy have undermined the OSCE institutional actors' capacity to engage in effective public communications or propel necessary institutional reforms. Moreover, Russian efforts to revise the core principles of the OSCE and Western neglect together minimized the room for compromise. As a result, this combination of factors has led to the decline of the organization as manifested in a loss of budget, policy output and scope, and political attention vis-à-vis competing IOs.

The OSCE is caught in a vicious cycle. Tensions and distrust among the participating states prevent meaningful reforms for the OSCE's institutions, which in turn prevents them from playing a meaningful role in overcoming lowest common denominator dynamics and effectively contributing to European security, thereby compounding the organization's ills. The gradual reduction in legitimacy since the 2000s and particularly the 2010s, coupled with failed attempts at (re)legitimation, have worsened the legitimacy crisis. It is difficult to envisage how the OSCE could escape this cycle. The need to lengthen the budgetary cycle, strengthen the position of the Secretary-General, or change the workings of the rotating chairpersonship are obvious, but the normative differences among the participating states are so profound and entrenched that any grand bargain seems unlikely. Indeed, the Russian attack on Ukraine is likely to signify the end of the cooperative security architecture in Europe, which included Russia as well as NATO members.

These findings should advance scholarly understanding of the crisis of the OSCE and of the European security architecture. Moreover, the article also nuances wider theo-

retical debates on IOs, legitimacy crises, and legitimation. As the analysis shows, the very ability to engage in legitimation practices is more contingent than widely presumed and depends on institutional features, leadership, and the stakeholder context within which the IO operates. With its institutional weaknesses and diverse membership, the OSCE was ill-positioned to pursue successful (re)legitimation. But amid increasing ideological diversity (e.g., Voeten 2020), many other institutionally weak IOs will likely face similar difficulties when facing legitimacy crises (see Hooghe et al. 2017: 150ff.). Future research could buttress the findings by applying the theoretical framework to other cases of failed and successful legitimation efforts.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *Global Studies Quarterly* data archive

Funding Information

This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 802568).

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