

## PREPARING FOR FUTURE OSCE MISSIONS: LESSONS FROM THE SPECIAL MONITORING MISSION (SMM) TO UKRAINE

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The largest international peace operation in Ukraine has been relegated to history. Its demise began with the Russian military attack on Ukraine and the temporary evacuation of international mission staff at the end of February/beginning of March 2022. On March 31, the OSCE Permanent Council was unable to extend the mandate of the Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine, as the Russian Federation objected to its continuation. This put the mission into an administrative and ultimately a closure mode.

Discussions have begun on whether (and when) a newly mandated peace operation could contribute to peace, stability and security in Ukraine. The “fog of war” makes it difficult to determine what concrete role such an operation could play, what tasks it should be given, what resources would be needed, and who could issue the corresponding mandate.

We do not know whether there will be a negotiated ceasefire between Russia and Ukraine and whether it might include a mandate for a peace operation. We do not know whether currently occupied territories will have to be reintegrated into Ukraine after the end of hostilities. And we do not know whether and what type of confidence-building and peacebuilding activities will be needed on the ground. All this depends on the further course of the war and the resulting power constellations. At present, some observers consider a ceasefire monitoring mission the most likely option for the future.

Another question is whether the OSCE would be able to mandate such an operation. The deployment of an OSCE field operation does not only require a formal invitation by the host country but also a consensus decision by all 57 participating States in the OSCE Permanent Council based in Vienna. The OSCE’s initial comparative advantage of having a ready-made monitoring mission framework in place with the SMM is now quickly dissipating, as former

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mission staff move on to other professional activities. Moreover, many of the mission's assets left in Ukraine have been destroyed, damaged or simply lost since the start of the war.

Still, history has also taught us that windows of opportunity emerge unexpectedly. So there might be a political constellation in which an OSCE field operation to monitor and verify a ceasefire is indeed in demand. In the end, this will depend on Kyiv's wish for such a mission and whether Russia agrees to the mandate, both in terms of tasks and the area of operations.

The OSCE can and should prepare for such a scenario. This suggests that it is the right time for the Secretariat to systematically evaluate the experiences of the SMM and learn the lessons of the obstacles which had hampered the mission throughout its deployment provided.

### **Setting up a mission from scratch**

The SMM to Ukraine was established in March 2014 with the mandate to reduce tensions and foster peace, stability and security, as well as to monitor and support the implementation of all OSCE principles and commitments. Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and given the tense situation in Eastern Ukraine, the SMM was to be deployed quickly. Since the OSCE had not run a mission of that type since deploying the Kosovo Verification Mission in 1998, there was little institutional knowledge in the Secretariat that could guide its establishment.

The Minsk agreements of September 2014 and February 2015 changed the mission's posture fundamentally. The mandated number of international civilian personnel grew from an initial 100 to 1,000, although actual numbers remained somewhere above 700. Almost two thirds of these were deployed to the Donetsk and Luhansk Monitoring Teams, operating on both sides of the Line of Contact.

In monitoring and verifying the Minsk obligations the SMM faced the challenge that the ceasefire was never fully observed, the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine continued with low intensity and its freedom of movement was often restricted. After 2020, mission operations were additionally affected by Covid-19, severely reducing staff availability, restricting personal contacts to counterparts and further hampering the movement of monitors.

While being faced with increasing external challenges, the SMM managed to fulfil the key aspects of its mandate. The latter was broad enough to cover its support to implement the Minsk provisions. The mission focused on factual, impartial reporting, the facilitation of local

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windows of silence and confidence building measures in co-operation with the Trilateral Contact Group chaired by the Special Representative of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office.

Still, a number of pertinent internal problems persisted and were regularly raised by seconding participating States and SMM staff. These testified to the fact that internal organizational development was a difficult endeavor for the mission.

## **1. Planning mandate implementation**

The mandate of the SMM encompassed a range of activities that were not spelled out in detail. This gave the mission sufficient flexibility to react to changes on the ground but implied that the mandated activities were supposed to be emphasized differently at different points in time.

That played out especially with respect to the Human Dimension (HD) as a core aspect of the OSCE's comprehensive approach to security, the role of which was always contested within the mission as well as among participating States. One faction of the mission held that HD should be pursued as a separate strand of activities, in parallel to ceasefire monitoring and the like. Others reasoned that the HD should be mainstreamed into all mission activities. While it is not unusual that there are opposing views on how to address cross-cutting issues, this question was never systematically resolved. As a result, different locations (teams and hubs) applied different HD approaches at different times.

## **2. Unifying Mission Structures and Procedures**

As already noted, there was little institutional knowledge that the OSCE Secretariat could chip in as guidance, and the SMM grew substantially after the Minsk agreements. The respective mission structures and procedures were largely designed by the first mission leadership and soon needed to be adjusted. Initially, there was a fair amount of discretion left to the teams in the field, resulting in diverse operational settings that varied between monitoring teams and locations. In the years that followed, management found it difficult to change the settings created in the early days.

Gradually, Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs) were developed for patrol planning and the like, providing the mission with a more unified structure. Nevertheless, SOPs were often regarded as cumbersome, not fitting the conditions in the field. Moreover, important operational knowledge was regularly lost when staff left the mission, as a functioning knowledge management system was absent and proper handovers were the exception.

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### **3. Mobilizing Human Resources**

Human resources are the most important asset of any mission. Here, the SMM was confronted with serious bottlenecks throughout its operation. Recruitment processes took far too long, resulting in serious backlogs to fill vacancies at almost all times.

In mobilizing staff, the terms of reference for monitoring officers, who represented the majority of mission personnel, turned out to be overly academic, not matching the qualifications needed in the field. Monitoring officers with university degrees found themselves utilized well below qualification. And while statements vis-à-vis seconding states repeatedly claimed that HD experts were in dire need, mission practice showed they were not. All this led to unnecessary frustrations among seconded staff.

### **4. Providing Management Support**

The establishment of the SMM also represented a management challenge. The leadership of the SMM, as in many other peace operations, was appointed in a political bargaining process. As a result, mission leadership had a profound background in international diplomacy. But managing a field operation that quickly grew to some 1,200 international and local staff was not something they were best prepared for. A contested division of labor between the deputy chief monitors and an unclear role of a chief of staff did not help either.

Effective middle managers with the respective skills were also a scarce resource, which negatively impacted on staff's motivation and discipline.

### **5. Fulfilling the Duty of Care**

The SMM, and partly the seconding states, underestimated the extent of its duty of care responsibilities. As the ceasefire was frequently violated, mission staff were regularly exposed to risks such as exchanges of fire, mines, unexploded ordnance and similar threats. While the SMM successfully introduced a system to support staff after security incidents, its overall security management left many seconding states and their secondees in doubt about whether it was sufficiently fit for the challenge. The 2022 evacuation proved that point.

Complaints of poorly maintained vehicles, inadequate protection gear, and defunct communication equipment were widespread. These deficits exposed personnel to much greater risks than necessary.

## 6. Strengthening Mission Oversight

Finally, mission oversight was fuzzy. The authority over the mandate lay with the participating States, which were not always unified in their understanding of SMM priorities. They were represented by the annually rotating Chairperson-in-Office. The Secretariat supported the mission in its everyday operations. In reality, there was often a perceived rift between the mission and these institutions. The SMM leadership in part over-used its high degree of discretion and avoided advice provided.

### Takeaways for the Future

There might be one positive in the unexpected closure of the SMM: It provides the chance to reflect on the challenges which were difficult to address in the day-to-day bustle of a mission operating in extremely challenging circumstances. The opportunity to invest in identifying and learning lessons that can guide planning for future missions is unmissable. Such an exercise should address, and further spell out, the following issues:

- With a view to providing strategic guidance for recruitment, operations and procurement, instruments that the UN and the EU apply in their missions can be explored. Strategic documents like a mission implementation plan or an operational concept regularly define, update and communicate the priorities of an operation and provide orientation to mission staff as to how to implement the mandate. Further guidance is made available by concepts for specific areas of activities. They foster operational coherence and allow a mission structure to follow its function.
- The set of SOPs that the SMM developed should be reviewed, at best involving persons who worked with them in the field. Having them ready for the future would be an asset. Identifying the pitfalls that needed to be overcome when introducing knowledge management systems or monitoring technology is equally valuable.
- Recruitment would benefit from a review that aims at more speedy placements that better meet a mission's requirements. Terms of reference for vacancies should be derived from the real demands of the mission. Also, the needs for induction and essential job-related training could be assessed.

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- There are tested ways to support leadership in peace operations. In some missions, a key role in relieving the political leadership falls to a chief of staff. It would also be useful to assess which trainings can help line managers cope with their work, and how to raise their awareness of how to communicate in a diverse mission.
  - Importantly, duty of care aspects need to be recognized as core issues for mission leadership, with mission security being on top of the list. Also, it would be useful to reflect on instruments and procedures that increase staff satisfaction and protect them from harassment.
  - Finally, considering how the responsibilities between the Chairperson-in-Office, Secretariat and the mission can be delineated more clearly could contribute to more accountability. Also, Secretariat capacities might need to be looked at.

Make no mistake — similar problems to those that plagued the SMM are also fairly typical for other international peace operations. This suggests including a peer exchange with other organizations into a lessons learned exercise.



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# **RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE OSCE**

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