

Chapter 1

Inter-State Diplomacy Within the OSCE Permanent Council



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1.1 Introduction

With its 57 participating states represented on site at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna, the OSCE is a microcosm of international diplomatic activity between countries stretching from the Euro-Atlantic area to Central Asia. Given its focus on issues such as security, democracy, and human rights, its participating states ultimately interact on a broad range of political issues on a regular basis. The organization's activity across its different so-called dimensions is usually carried out by its component bodies such as its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) which is responsible for election monitoring, or its High Commissioner on National Minorities which handles (potential) ethnic tensions in OSCE participating states. However, the management of the organization's activities at large ultimately resides within a particular political body, its Permanent Council (PC). Here, representatives of all participating states regularly meet and make essential decisions for the functioning of the OSCE as a whole. Beyond its decision-making role, the Permanent Council, which meets on the premises of the organization's headquarters in Vienna, also serves as a forum for debates between participating states on ongoing political issues affecting them. In essence, the Permanent Council can be considered the "hub of the OSCE" (Stefan-Bastl, 2003).

This chapter outlines the role(s) and modes of operation of inter-state diplomacy within the OSCE Permanent Council. It argues that the state of political relations between OSCE participating states exhibited within the Permanent Council can contribute to our understanding of political tensions in the OSCE's geographical space, ranging from Canada and the United States in the West, across Europe and Turkey, to Central Asia and Mongolia in the East.

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To assess the inter-state diplomacy of its participating states, it also helps to identify factors which facilitate or hinder the functioning of the organization at large, and particularly its capacity to positively intervene in conflicts in the wider OSCE space. The chapter focuses, in particular, on the alliance patterns which become apparent in the Permanent Council. These can usually be observed through the presentation of joint statements, reinforcement of one another's contributions, or collective shaping of individual aspects of the meeting agendas. A particular focus in this analysis lies on the unique behaviour of European Union (EU) member states and like-minded countries in the Permanent Council, which often effectively operate as one entity rather than dozens of individual participating states. Such behaviour is then also considered with regard to other countries' participation in Permanent Council meetings and compared to the behaviour of the large EU-bloc present within it. Lastly, the chapter utilizes a case study on the Russia-Ukraine conflict prior to Russia's reinvasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 to outline how the ultimately political nature of this body affects the OSCE's ability to mediate conflicts.

Beyond such insights into alliance behaviour, a focus on the role of the OSCE's Permanent Council is also relevant in its own right. While considerable scholarly attention has been paid to many of the OSCE's institutions, such as its Secretariat and the role of its Secretary General (Knill et al., 2016), the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office (Kemp, 2009; Raunig & Peer, 2019; Vandewoude, 2011), and its Parliamentary Assembly (Chepurina, 2017; Cutler, 2006; Gawrich, 2017; Habegger, 2006, 2010; Lipps, 2021), specific work on the Permanent Council is almost non-existent (absent the early exception of Stefan-Bastl, 2003). While countries' behaviour within the Permanent Council is sometimes featured in the margins of research outlining countries' stances within the OSCE at large (see, for instance, Janeliūnas, 2013 or Šimáková, 2016), there has been little consideration of the institution in and of itself, and even less on the behaviour of OSCE participating states within it.

The analysis in the chapter is based on the agendas and minutes of OSCE Permanent Council meetings which are publicly and electronically recorded as per the OSCE's rules of procedure (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). These include not only the actual subjects which were discussed, but also a list of statements given by individual participating states and others. While the available data does not include the transcripts of statements as a matter of principle, the text of individual statements is still available separately in many cases.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows. It first outlines the role which the Permanent Council plays for the OSCE at large, as well as describing how diplomatic interaction occurs within it. The chapter then moves on to describe and illustrate regular and key alliance patterns present within the Permanent Council, focusing on the most prevalent alliance, that of European Union member states and their regular partners. It then discusses the insights that can be drawn from these patterns for the functioning of the wider OSCE, as well as the overall political ties between different groups of countries using recent examples of key conflicts between OSCE participating states as examples, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict, in particular.

1.2 The OSCE Permanent Council

Summits of the heads of state and governments of the OSCE's participating states technically form the organization's highest decision-making body, and were initially meant to be held every two years (Zellner, 2011). However, only seven have been held over the course of the long history of the OSCE and its predecessor, the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). These are also usually reserved for the introduction of wide-ranging changes to the functioning of the entire organization in accordance with changing international circumstances, though this has only seen mixed success depending on the summit at hand (Zellner, 2011). Given the difficulties encountered at its last meeting in Astana in 2010, future such meetings now appear ever less likely (Zagorski, 2011). This leaves the annual Ministerial Councils held in the country of the rotating Chairmanship-in-Office as the *de facto* highest political authority of the institution.

However, the infrequent nature of these meetings means that the most regular and meaningful political interaction among participating states ultimately occurs within the organization's Permanent Council. According to the OSCE's rules of procedure, the "Permanent Council (PC) is the principal decision-making body for regular political consultations and for governing the day-to-day operational work of the Organization between meetings of the Ministerial Council" (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). As such, it serves a number of decision-making and consultation roles among OSCE participating states (Stefan-Bastl, 2003).

The Permanent Council is composed of the OSCE participating states' permanent representatives and diplomats to the OSCE. As these are usually based in Vienna, the Permanent Council is thus composed of a group of diplomats who operate in the same work environment and interact with one another on a very regular basis. Under normal circumstances, Permanent Council meetings take place once per week (with the exceptions of winter and summer holiday seasons), and sometimes even more often. This body thus provides for frequent and structured diplomatic contact between the OSCE's participating states through and beyond its formal decision-making role for the OSCE itself. While state representatives are the Permanent Council's core participants, its role and function also means that there are regularly scheduled appearances of various other OSCE representatives within this body. These include the OSCE's General Secretary, OSCE mission heads or special representatives, and other invited guests. Occasionally, this also includes diplomats from the eleven OSCE Partnership for Co-operation countries, who are allowed to participate in OSCE Permanent Council meetings without voting rights.

The Permanent Council's core task is to make operational decisions for the OSCE by consensus. Nonetheless, most of its meetings are devoted to wider political discussions between representatives of OSCE participating states as the body is also meant to serve as a forum for political consultations. Building on the Permanent Council's structured agenda items, participating states use the weekly meetings to debate issues either relevant for the entirety of the organization and its membership or concerning specific developments in individual countries.

The agenda is ultimately managed by the representative of the country holding the OSCE's rotating Chairmanship-in-Office, but the discussion of specific topics can be requested by any regular attendee at Permanent Council meetings. While some issues appear on the agenda quite regularly based on specific anniversaries relevant for the organization's history, relevant historic events in the wider European area, or regular reports of other OSCE bodies, other ongoing issues are also put on the Permanent Council's agenda by countries affected by them. This can lead to individual issues appearing on the same agenda multiple times but under distinct headings proposed by specific participating states. This typically occurs when there is a conflict or when there are significant political differences on an issue between participating states as each side might then suggest an agenda item that suits their interpretation of the issue at hand.

Debates then proceed with individual countries making statements in turn, usually beginning with the country which proposed the agenda item in question. The format of the proceedings also liberally allows for repeat interventions on the same topic (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006). It is also permissible for countries not to intervene at all, as there is no obligation to partake in debates or respond to political statements directly targeted at individual countries. Similarly, while Permanent Council decisions are made based on the consensus principle, in theory necessitating that all 57 participating states agree, some degree of dissent can be voiced by interpretative statements attached to OSCE decisions. Much like for the discussions on other Permanent Council issues, interpretative statements are then often political in nature.

While participating states usually intervene individually in Permanent Council meetings, it is also permissible—and indeed relatively frequent—for groups of countries to give joint statements, where only one of the countries in question will participate in the debate, but clearly indicate that this contribution is also made “on behalf” of others. This occurs in cases when the views of specific groups of participating states are closely aligned.

Aside from these often changing and rather ad hoc possibilities for countries to speak as a group, there is also a much more regular and organized version of this system at play for OSCE participating states who are simultaneously members of the EU. These have, for a long period of time, resorted to making collective statements given by the rotating chairmanship of the EU. A representative of the EU's own bureaucracy, the European Commission (OSCE Ministerial Council, 2006), is also entitled to participate in and speak at OSCE Permanent Council meetings since EU member states have given up their domestic powers to the EU in some of the issue areas debated at the OSCE. This is not how the EU operates at the OSCE in practice, however. Since the EU changed the functioning of its foreign policy system under the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, there now is a dedicated EU permanent representative to the OSCE who makes collective statements for the EU (its member states and the European Commission) in practice. However, this is not formally recognized by the OSCE, as it is almost impossible to reform the existing rules of procedure. This is due to widely diverging political views on even the (future) legal status of the OSCE (Börzel & Peters, 2019), which would necessarily affect any attempts to formally modify its current mode of operation.

Much like participating states can decide to give joint statements under the “on behalf” system outlined above, some participating states also choose to do so when the EU makes statements of its own. While the EU then technically also gives these statements “on behalf” of these countries, this is described as countries being “in alignment” with the EU’s position, and thus recorded separately in OSCE Permanent Council minutes. In practice, however, this further increases the number of countries signing on to individual EU statements, much like for countries giving statements “on behalf” of others. Both the “on behalf” and alignment system can also be used for interpretative statements to substantive decisions made in the OSCE Permanent Council.

Through the setting of competing agendas and the giving of joint statements, it is thus possible for OSCE participating states to indicate the proximity of their views via actions in the OSCE Permanent Council and thereby ultimately exhibit alliance behaviour within it.

1.3 Regular Alliance Patterns in the OSCE Permanent Council

The different kinds of potential alliance behaviour outlined above regularly occur in the OSCE’s Permanent Council setting, with the EU being at the centre of such developments. A consideration of these helps to understand the political dynamics of the Permanent Council in practice and ultimately casts some doubt on whether it can really be considered a forum for debate among the 57 individual participating states.

The most frequent kind of alliance behaviour observed in OSCE Permanent Council settings is the EU’s collective activity within this body. In recent years, collective EU statements have been the norm rather than the exception at almost all Permanent Council meetings. For almost any agenda item, it is possible to find a collective statement given by the European Union’s representative, and it is common practice for the EU, rather than its individual members to collectively suggest agenda items. This, in consequence, also means that the 27 OSCE participating states who are also simultaneously members of the European Union are very infrequent individual participants in OSCE Permanent Council meetings. While the EU has attempted to act as one within the OSCE for a long period of time (van Ham, 2009), this has become even more pronounced since 2009 when the European Union altered its functioning under the Treaty of Lisbon to further centralize its foreign policy behaviour. This has been described as its “single voice mantra” (Conceição-Heldt & Meunier, 2014; Macaj & Nicolaïdis, 2014) for its foreign policy as a whole, but is particularly developed in the OSCE setting. What is especially remarkable about this is that this mode of functioning relies on EU member countries to prepare statements under a similar consensus principle as applies to the OSCE at large. All collective EU statements on topics ranging from the situation in the Donbas region to congratulating the

new OSCE Secretary General have therefore been prepared and agreed upon by the EU's representative and those of its 27 member states ahead of Permanent Council sessions.

This is not to say that OSCE participating states who are simultaneously members of the EU have entirely given up on being active participants at Permanent Council meetings. Indeed, countries occasionally still make statements on their own, though often under specific circumstances. Firstly, the necessity for the EU to come to a prior agreement on all statements given by it makes it a very inflexible participant in ongoing debates. It is thus often individual EU member states who then need to intervene when a response is necessary to a statement given by another OSCE participating state which concerns the EU. Similarly, some EU member states such as France or Germany are individually part of the OSCE's so-called Minsk group meant to mediate in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or the so-called Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. These tasks require specific EU countries to regularly report back to the Permanent Council, and thus necessitates them to act individually.

The alliance pattern observed here does not end with the EU's 27 member states however. In addition to the coordination of collective EU statements, every effort is also made to have other countries align with the EU's position on a regular basis. This is successful to some degree for almost all EU statements, and effectively extends the EU's collective voice further, often leading to situations where an EU statement represents the majority of OSCE participating states overall. The countries usually making use of this offer often do so given their special relationship to the EU itself. For instance, Iceland is tied very closely to the EU economically through its membership in the European Economic Area (EEA) and is one of the countries which aligns very frequently with the EU's statements. What's more, other countries that regularly align with the EU's position in the Permanent Council are at various stages of attempting to join the EU itself, such as Montenegro, North Macedonia, or Albania. For these countries, this can represent actual alignment with the EU's position, their desire to signal wanting to move closer to the EU ahead of their potential membership, or even them fulfilling a soft legal demand by the EU to gradually align their foreign policy with that of the EU as their EU accession process progresses (Aydın-Düzgit et al., 2021). In any case where a country which has such a special relationship to the EU aligns with the EU's position, then the actual statement will not just record the country's name, but also the kind of special ties that the country has to the EU itself, such as it being a candidate for membership.

Whereas it is thus the norm for EU positions to be held in the name of more countries than its actual membership, it is also important to point out countries which one would expect to regularly align with the EU's position, but ultimately do not. Two clear outliers in this regard are the United Kingdom and Switzerland. While the latter is tied to the EU almost as closely as Iceland through its bilateral agreements, the former was part of the European Union until 2020. In the case of Switzerland, this can likely be explained by the country's desire to act independently in line with its history of neutrality. The British case, on the other hand, is ultimately tied to the country's withdrawal process from the EU and wanting to reassert its independence.

There are also some countries such as Serbia and Norway which sometimes align with the EU's position but do not do so as frequently as, say, Montenegro. Norway tends to hold independent statements on issues relating to democracy, human rights, or the freedom of the media, while aligning with the EU's view in other cases. Serbia, on the other hand, is a candidate for EU membership, yet still decides not to participate in EU statements relatively frequently. Ultimately, this is likely down to long-standing diverging views on some foreign policy issues compared to the EU mainstream which cannot be bridged quite as easily. Lastly, while one would also expect that countries like the United States or Canada would share the EU's views in many instances, these also opt to stay almost entirely away from aligning with the EU's position to present an independent voice in the organization.

The kind of alliance behaviour exhibited by the EU through its collective statements is by far the most common occurrence of such behaviour at the OSCE and signals the existence of a relatively coherent political group present within it. That is not to say that other participating states do not make use of their ability to present collective statements under the "on behalf" system. However, this happens much more rarely, and typically does not come anywhere close to the number of countries involved in EU collective statements. Whereas the range of topics covered by EU collective statements is almost exhaustive, other cases of collective statement furthermore often apply to relatively ceremonial statements. For instance, every year, on the anniversary of the end of World War II, many countries who were formerly part of the Soviet Union tend to present a collective statement. In 2019, such a statement was given by Kyrgyzstan on behalf of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019a). In 2021, a similar statement given by Russia also included Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, which were formerly part of Yugoslavia (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021a) and fought on the same side as the Soviet Union during World War II. What is particularly interesting about such ceremonial statements is their ability to bring together countries otherwise separated by strong tensions. This was particularly relevant in said 2021 statement by Russia, to which both Armenia and Azerbaijan signed on despite the recent 2020 war in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

Other occasions where such alliance behaviour can be observed on an even smaller basis are in positions held on issues such as the freedom of the media or human rights, which bring together countries like Iceland, Norway, or Switzerland (and sometimes Canada) who are particularly keen on promoting such values in their foreign policy. Lastly, there are also a few instances in which relatively large groups of participating states choose to make collective statements, including EU member states. One such example was in the Permanent Council meeting of 13 June 2019 on the topic of elections in one of the breakaway regions of Georgia which is occupied by Russia, where the EU gave a collective statement. Poland then gave an additional, harsher collective statement supported by a large group of EU countries which are traditionally the most critical towards Russia, to which Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States also signed on. The statement was particularly clear in pointing to Russia's role in violating Georgia's territorial integrity (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019b).

Similar statements by almost identical groups of states were also given on other occasions when the issue appeared on the OSCE's Permanent Council agenda. Again, while such statements remain exceptions, these nonetheless occasionally come up for other issues as well, such as on the topic of human rights violations in Chechnya (OSCE Permanent Council, 2020a), or the deteriorating human rights situation in Belarus (OSCE Permanent Council, 2020b, 2020c) when groups of participating states debated and ultimately discussed invoking the so-called Moscow Mechanism.¹

There are also occasional instances of a large plurality of OSCE participating states signing on to collective statements to underline their common commitment to a particular cause. One such instance was a statement given by the Czech Republic on 4 July 2019 on behalf of 46 of the OSCE's 57 participating states on the occasion of the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture (OSCE Permanent Council, 2019c). Here, the EU as a collective entity tends to be absent given the lack of formal recognition of its standing at the organization.

Another possible way to indicate alliance behaviour is to make specific choices as to which agenda items participating states partake in during Permanent Council discussions. Given the aforementioned point that specific conflicts often appear as separate agenda items with distinct wording, participating states can ultimately make the choice under which specific reading of a conflict situation they want to intervene.

An example of such competing agenda items relates to the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. There have been very few Permanent Council meetings in recent years when this topic has not been on the agenda, usually as part of its regular wider agenda category on current issues. While the existence of a continued dispute between the two countries on these matters is neither surprising nor particularly insightful, the way in which the matter is discussed more widely remains indicative of the political tensions present within the organization. Given the fundamental underlying disagreement surrounding how to interpret the conflict at hand, the matter is typically raised twice on each meeting agenda: once as a topic introduced by Ukraine on "Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine and illegal occupation of Crimea," and simultaneously as a Russia-sponsored agenda item on the "[s]ituation in Ukraine and the need to implement the Minsk agreements."

The latter agenda item which represents the Russian reading of the state of the conflict usually only sees very few interventions by participating states. There is usually only an initial statement by Russia, to which Ukraine tends to respond immediately. Most of the time, all other participating states then ignore Russia's agenda item unless the content of Russia's statement warrants a direct response when individual participating states have been specifically singled out in a Russian statement. In contrast, the agenda item raised by Ukraine sees much more frequent contributions by other participating states. Typically, it is the EU and its allies who will respond immediately after Ukraine. While these statements are usually also somewhat critical of Ukraine's role in the ongoing armed conflict, the statements are generally largely supportive of the overall interpretation of Ukraine's position on this topic. This is

¹ This allows the OSCE to send experts to individual participating states in order to resolve issues related to the OSCE's human dimension.

similar behaviour to that shown by other regular interveners on this agenda item such as the United States and Canada.

In recent years, similar competing agenda items could also regularly be observed in the wake of the 2020 war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which put Armenia and Azerbaijan at odds with one another. Since the renewed outbreak of the conflict, Armenia has regularly added an agenda item on the “Aggression of Azerbaijan against Artsakh and Armenia with the direct involvement of Turkey and foreign terrorist fighters” where it tends to remain the sole intervener. Likewise, a separate agenda item by Azerbaijan on the “de-occupation and ‘counter-offensive’ in the captured territories” (or a similar item) mostly sees only Azerbaijan, and sometimes Turkey, intervene. To avoid ascribing support to either reading of the conflict proposed by the belligerents, a more neutral third agenda item on the “situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh” often sees many more contributions by participating states not directly involved in the conflict.

While most cases of competing agenda items relate to ongoing issues, sometimes this can also occur on the anniversary of a past conflict when a different reading of history by distinct groups of participating states prevails. For instance, on the 22nd anniversary of NATO’s intervention in the Kosovo conflict at the session of 25 March 2021, two distinct agenda items on the subject existed. The first, proposed by Serbia, was on the “Twenty-second anniversary of NATO’s aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” while the other, sponsored by the United States, was entitled “Twenty-second anniversary of NATO’s response to the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo.” Whereas only Serbia and Russia spoke under the first heading, the second was exclusively used by NATO members to emphasize their views on the anniversary.

Overall, OSCE participating states thus have distinct ways to indicate the proximity (or indeed opposition) of their views within OSCE Permanent Council meetings. However, the above consideration of actual alliance patterns observed also leads to the conclusion that, while alliance behaviour is particularly pronounced for EU member states and their allies (such as accession candidates), such tools are used much less frequently by other OSCE participating states. Overall, it is thus sensible to consider OSCE Permanent Council interactions not primarily as separate interactions between all 57 individual participating states, but rather as interactions between one relatively coherent block representing almost half of the OSCE’s participating states and the remaining individual states, with occasional alliance behaviour exhibited there as well, underlining the political nature of this body.

1.4 The Permanent Council as the Heartbeat of the OSCE

The kinds of alliance patterns which can be regularly observed in the OSCE’s Permanent Council are ultimately representative of wider political issues affecting the organization. It is the heartbeat of the OSCE and, hence, illustrates the current state of tensions between some of its participating states based upon how participating states

which are not directly affected by them take sides on controversial matters. The debates and tensions surrounding the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict illustrate how state behaviour in the OSCE Permanent Council relates to the OSCE's ability to intervene in ongoing conflicts. It is the parallel political and decision-making roles of the Permanent Council which render it more difficult for the OSCE to play an active, neutral, and positive role in ongoing conflicts.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict is perhaps best suited to illustrating how the political nature of the Permanent Council relates to the OSCE's ability to intervene in conflicts affecting its participating states. This is not least the case since it was this very conflict which contributed to the renewed relevance of the organization at large (Lehne, 2015) as it has played an active role in mediating the conflict across its different phases from the initial protests in Ukraine, to the annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region. What has further made the organization ideally suited to dealing with this conflict is its aim to consider security from a wide range of perspectives, as well as its inclusive membership which brings together the different state parties to this conflict. Indeed, as most forums for East–West dialogue and between Russia and Ukraine were suspended amidst the onset of the crisis, it was in the setting of the OSCE that the first mediating steps could be taken (Kropatcheva, 2015).

However, its inclusive membership and the consensus principle which lies at the heart of OSCE decision-making has ultimately made it more difficult for it to achieve this task, especially when a wide array of OSCE participating states take sides. In the case of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, diverging views between the two countries were to be expected. While Russia has and continues to insist (Åtland, 2020; Haug, 2016) that it is not playing an active role in the Donbas conflict and that it now considers Crimea to be an integral part of Russia, the Ukrainian view has obviously been different. While the latter's interpretation is largely shared by many Western OSCE participating states, the strength of support for Ukraine ultimately differs among individual Western parties (Kropatcheva, 2015). While these disputes have been aired in diplomatic statements in the OSCE Permanent Council, they have also affected the decision-making of this body, with real-life consequences on the ground.

The OSCE was able to set up its Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine which was meant to observe the situation on the ground and mediate in the conflict since 2014. Beyond this, the OSCE has also set up an observer mission on the Russia-Ukraine border, as well as facilitated political dialogue through the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine. Each of these ultimately require the consent of all participating states in the Permanent Council, making an active OSCE contribution to conflict resolution dependent on the very actors involved within it and regularly at odds in political discussions within the Permanent Council.

This has had consequences for the conduct of the OSCE's operations on the ground. The OSCE Permanent Council has been able to regularly come to a unanimous agreement over the extension of the mandate of the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. However, its ability to perform its duties is constantly hampered in practice by diverging views on the conflict. The ability to come to a consensus over the

SMM ultimately relies on the lack of clarity in the operation's mandate and it being subject to various interpretative statements by individual participating states, which regularly confirm their differing views on the conflict. Russia, for instance regularly emphasizes the SMM's lack of operational authority over Crimea, as the country now considers this to be an integral part of Russia. At the same time, it points to a necessity to monitor the rights of the Russian-speaking minority in all of Ukraine (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021b, attachment 3).

Ukraine, on the other hand underlines the relevance of monitoring the situation with regard to Crimea, as well as monitoring Russian support for insurgents in the Donbas region (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021b, attachment 6). Other countries' interpretative statements largely fall in line with the observed alliance patterns for the issues discussed above, with the EU (and a number of aligning countries), as well as Canada and the United Kingdom, also underlining its view that Russia is attempting to undermine the effectiveness of the SMM on the ground.

Different from the Special Monitoring Mission, the effectiveness of the related OSCE Observer Operation on the formal Russia-Ukraine border has been further hampered by the severe limitations to its mandate imposed by Russia. Here, the country refused to extend the observer's mandate beyond two particular border crossings (Oberson, 2021), while also not allowing the observers to conduct searches there (Kemp, 2018). As a result, the operation was discontinued at the end of September 2021 (OSCE Observer Mission at Russian Checkpoints Gukovo and Donetsk, 2021). Once more, the final decision related to ending this operation demonstrates the internal divisions. While Ukraine, the EU, and some aligning countries, as well as Canada, the UK, and the United States, have deplored Russia's lack of willingness to prolong the operation (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021c, Attachments 1–4), Russia pointed out that it was no longer willing to prolong it given ongoing political divisions over the Russia-Ukraine conflict (OSCE Permanent Council, 2021c, Attachment 5).

These difficulties in coming to a common vision on how the OSCE should intervene in ongoing conflicts is thus directly related to the simultaneously political role of the Permanent Council. Here, long-lasting frictions dating back to at least the Russia-Georgian war of 2008 have contributed to Russia having an uneasy relationship with the OSCE (Kropatcheva, 2012, 2015). Furthermore, the country has increasingly seen itself being relatively isolated in the organization, with its efforts to develop similar alliance behaviour to that of the EU among members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) having largely failed (Kropatcheva, 2012). Absent ceremonial occasions, such as the commemoration of the end of World War II, the formal members of the CIS instead prefer to issue their own statements in the Permanent Council or to remain silent. This lack of acceptance of the organization as a neutral arbiter given its membership and the politically charged nature of its debates thus ultimately hampers its ability to utilize the tools at its disposal to successfully mediate ongoing conflicts.

While Russia's current ambivalent stance towards the OSCE's role in conflict situations has served to illustrate the problematic link between the political nature of the Permanent Council and the organization's ability to fulfil its mandate, it is

important to consider that this is but one prominent example of participating states' reluctance to allow the OSCE to play an active role where it was meant to do so. For instance, while the EU has been keen to promote an active OSCE role in recent ongoing conflicts, including the one between Russia and Ukraine, EU member states are much more reluctant to accept a role for the OSCE in mediating conflicts involving the EU itself or for tensions between its member states (Kropatcheva, 2012). The United States has long kept a low profile in the organization as well (Hopmann, 2019; Nünlist, 2017), with the Trump administration making its participation in it ever more problematic (Hopmann, 2019). One example where the US has also constantly refused to allow the OSCE to take an active role is in debating the issue of the continued use of the death penalty by the US federal government and some US states.

While the kind of alliance behaviour which can be observed in the Permanent Council thus helps to illustrate the political tensions among its members, the parallel presence of political discussions and formal decision-making powers thus ultimately makes it difficult for the OSCE to act in ongoing conflicts as intended.

1.5 Conclusion

Consideration of the behaviour of OSCE participating states within its core political and decision-making body, the Permanent Council, allows for not only the measurement of the heartbeat of the organization, but also an evaluation of the effects of its functioning, both for the OSCE itself and between its participating states more generally.

While the activities of the Permanent Council are largely limited to countries giving statements on particular agenda items, the patterns of participation themselves are indicative of alliance behaviour within the OSCE. Such behaviour ranges from agenda setting and intervention under particular item headings to actual cooperation between participating states as part of collective statements. A consideration of these reveal that ongoing conflicts involving OSCE participating states find a discursive outlet in the OSCE's Permanent Council. Given the possibility of politically framing individual agenda items, the same subject is often discussed within individual Permanent Council sessions, albeit from radically differing political perspectives.

Collective actions by some participating states then also reveal regular alliance patterns that can be observed even when countries technically partake in the OSCE on an individual basis. Here, the European Union member states and certain closely affiliated countries stand out as a singular bloc making up the majority of OSCE participating states. While some other alliance behaviours can also be observed within the Permanent Council, these are much less frequent and involve far fewer countries than in the case of the EU. This is despite efforts by countries such as Russia to establish the CIS as a distinct bloc within the Permanent Council.

The observed alliance behaviour is but one element exhibiting the ultimately political nature of the Political Council. As the case study on the Russia-Ukraine

conflict has shown, this is particularly problematic in a setting where the OSCE's capacity to mediate an ongoing conflict are directly tied to the consensual decision-making within the Permanent Council. The patterns of political alignment observed within the Permanent Council thus do not only matter in terms of its role as a forum for diplomatic interaction, but have real-life consequences on the OSCE's ability to be an active player on the ground during ongoing conflicts.

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