



Strategic Security Analysis

Mine Action as a Confidence- and Security-building Measure in the OSCE Region

Claudia Ditel



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The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), jointly with the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (IFSH) and in partnership with the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP), Moscow State University of International Relations (MGIMO) and the Vienna Centre for Disarmament and Non-proliferation (VCDNP), has launched an “OSCE-IFSH Essay Competition: Conventional Arms Control and Confidence- and Security-Building Measures in Europe”. The project aims at facilitating the continuity of knowledge and expertise on arms control and CSBM processes at the OSCE among students and recent graduates interested in peace and security studies. This essay has participated in the 2021 competition and has been awarded the third prize.

Key Points

- Mine action has the potential to incentivise confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs), because it could contribute to development and reconciliation through the creation of communities of practice among individuals from civil society and at the grassroots level as part of post-conflict reconstruction.
- Although many Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) participating States are contaminated by mines, mine action as a CSBM has scarcely been included in peace negotiations, because it is thought that it might hinder the peace process.
- Yet mine action, if “depoliticised”, could be implemented independently of peace negotiations through the creation of spaces for cooperation in demining projects of common interest to rival communities.
- The OSCE is well placed to propose these strategies, especially in Eastern Ukraine, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, which are not only affected by protracted conflicts with limited engagement of the population in the peace process but are also highly contaminated by mines.

About the Author

Claudia Ditel, an Italian national, is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz (Austria). She obtained a Master’s in Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe at the University of Bologna. Her current research examines social mobilisation as a confidence-building practice in deeply divided areas following violent conflicts. Her interests include nationalism, ethnic conflicts, conflict resolution and the role of civil society, with a particular focus on Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

Introduction

Landmines are designed to maim or kill indiscriminately and can lie inactive in the soil for years. As such, they represent a constant threat to local populations, restrict people's freedom of movement, and pose an obstacle to the return of refugees and to development during post-conflict reconstruction.¹ Currently tens of millions of landmines have been laid in more than 60 countries and many of them are still unmapped.² Among the most contaminated countries worldwide, four are in the OSCE region: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Turkey. Armenia, Ukraine, and Georgia are also highly contaminated.³ In addition, several OSCE countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Russia, the United States, and Uzbekistan) did not join the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (generally known as the Ottawa Convention), which bans the use, production, stockpiling, and transfer of anti-personnel landmines; encourages mutual assistance among states parties to destroy existing landmines and stockpiles as soon as possible; and provides assistance to mine victims.⁴ Some of the non-signatory states are engaged in protracted conflicts in which the OSCE has played a role for years as mediator or facilitator in negotiations.

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This paper investigates whether mine action could be implemented as a CSBM as part of conflict transformation in the OSCE region, taking three post-Soviet ethnic conflicts as case studies (Georgia, Eastern Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh), where the problem of landmines and protracted conflicts are two interconnected dimensions of the same complex scenario, although with the possibility of generalising results to other areas. The study starts by illustrating the evolution of mine action and then moves on to address the multitrack approach to peacebuilding to explain how this can be combined with mine action. By reviewing the literature on conflict transformation and good practices worldwide, the study concludes that there is sufficient ground to consider mine action to be a promising CSBM in the OSCE area.

The evolution of mine action: from humanitarianism to conflict transformation

Over the years it became clear that demining had a development dimension, because the presence of mines affects the social and economic recovery of communities affected by conflict.

Mine action started to develop in the late 1980s as a humanitarian and stand-alone technical measure comprising the identification and destruction of landmines.⁵ Over the years it became clear that demining had a development dimension, because the presence of mines affects the social and economic recovery of communities affected by conflict, since landmines can block the use of lands, roads, schools, and other basic facilities. As a result, the international community started to view mine action as a means to boost development, and mine action in local communities started to receive more attention.⁶ During the latter half of the 1990s, as part of the new concept of “humanitarian mine action”, mine risk education (MRE), advocacy, victim assistance, rehabilitation, reintegration and advocacy were added to the activity of mine clearance.⁷ As part of this new approach, many practitioners also started to include gender approaches to mine action.⁸

It was with the Bad Honnef Framework (BHF) that mine action moved an important step forward by adding the peacebuilding dimension to the mine action equation. The BHF is a series of guidelines adopted in 1999 by the Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines. These guidelines adopt a comprehensive approach to mine clearance that simultaneously addresses development and peacebuilding.⁹ They are based on three principles:

- *participation*, which refers to the importance of involving the people whose lives are affected by landmines in mine action
- *coherence*, which implies that mine action should combine emergency relief measures with development and peacebuilding efforts; and
- *solidarity*, which requires that programmes should not create new dependencies on external actors but should rather encourage local ownership of the process.

Mine action in from multitrack perspective

Multitrack approaches to peacebuilding

According to sociologist John Paul Lederach, peacebuilding is a long-term process designed to achieve a systemic transformation from war to peace through the use of social cohesion activities that nurture reconciliation, especially work initiatives that promote mutual accountability.¹⁰ Lederach considers this transformation to be a multitrack process. He asserts that transformation at the Track II level (i.e. among the middle-range of community leadership such as NGOs, academics and religious leaders) influences the Track III (grassroot population, including women and internally displaced persons, or IDPs) and Track I (top leadership) levels,¹¹ whereas Paffenholz argues that grassroots communities constitute the most influential level.¹² Despite such differences of interpretation, the multitrack approach offers a promising framework to consider mine action as a CSBM.

If we zoom in on the microprocesses occurring in Tracks II and III, it is worth considering the transformative power of the community of practice (CoP) model elaborated by anthropologists Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger. CoP is a learning theory that has as its basis a community formed by “people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor”.¹³ In other words, a CoP is a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something and learn how to do it better through repeated interaction. The CoP model can be applied in any context, as long as the core elements characterising it are present: the *domain* (an interest shared by a community, so that the individuals forming a community wish to commit to a specific task); the *community* (interaction, accountability, and mutual learning developed among members dealing with a specific task); and the *practice* (the repertoire of shared knowledge, practices and experiences built by the community for the community). Romashov et al. hypothesise the application of the learning model to the case of Nagorno-Karabakh as a post-liberal approach to conflict transformation.¹⁴ They suggest that a third neutral actor should encourage bottom-up strategies that take into consideration the need of the communities and that lead to tangible outcomes that are beneficial to local community members’ everyday lives. In other words, the CoP model applied in conflict transformation posits that only by addressing concrete problems will it be possible to stimulate mutual engagement in a particular domain. Accordingly, mine action as a community of practice can create spaces for locals to engage in dialogue and break out of their respective ideological positions. Concrete achievements may keep the peace process moving at an informal Track II and Track III level despite stalemate at the Track I level. As a report by the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining and swisspeace¹⁵ suggests, mine action can be implemented as a CSBM especially in locations where conflicting parties tend to work in isolation, have limited contacts and have developed low levels of mutual trust.¹⁶

Peacebuilding is a long-term process designed to achieve a systemic transformation from war to peace through the use of social cohesion activities that nurture reconciliation.

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Lessons learnt worldwide

Based on fieldwork conducted in South-east Asia in 2005 and 2006, Gilson examines the inter-country development of mechanisms of mutual learning and trust building by NGOs dealing with mine action.¹⁷ She concludes that a community of mine action started to develop across Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam thanks to the contingencies of geographical proximity, similarities among internal coordinating structures and the role of the international community acting as a facilitator.

Harpviken and Ska°ra report how during the civil war in Sri Lanka the government reached a cooperation agreement with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam to demine a key highway connecting the Jaffna Peninsula to the rest of the country. The opening of the highway enhanced confidence among the conflicted parties, generated positive attitudes and prepared the ground for more productive negotiations.¹⁸ In other words, an alternative approach to conflict transformation could consist of implementing “depoliticising” peacebuilding strategies by creating reconciliation opportunities without addressing the political debate separating the opposed parties. According to Maspoli, the use of mine action as a peace mediation strategy is driven by the fact that it can be an entry point to engage conflict parties in confidence-building activities.¹⁹ Mine action programmes can be complementary to other CSBMs, including the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of former combatants. In March 2015 the Colombian government and the insurgent Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia worked together in a joint humanitarian demining project while the peace negotiations were still ongoing.²⁰

In Cyprus, the UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS) monitored the implementation of joint demining programmes by the opposing Greek and Turkish communities to open two border crossing sites along the line of contact. UNMAS also assisted locals to identify and return remains of missing persons as a symbol of reconciliation.²¹

Mine action can open the door to the implementation of gender-sensitive approaches. A study conducted in Lebanon and Colombia acknowledged how women members of some communities felt empowered and more influential within their households and communities following their participation in mine action programmes.²² While men and boys are the main victims of mines, women are indirect victims. Their freedom of movement is further restricted and their economic insecurity increases after the loss of or injuries to male family members. Moreover, women victims of mines are less likely to have access to proper medical assistance and are more likely to become victims of stigmatisation and isolation from the community.²³ Including women in mine action can lead to different types of contaminated areas being reported and the implementation of different priorities for clearance activities.²⁴ Besides being both an income-generating and participatory activity for locals, mine action can combine peacebuilding and empowerment approaches. Indeed, the militaristic rhetoric generated by protracted conflicts affects women’s security and decision-making power in the long term. Gender and conflict studies suggest that women are promising actors of change because they reject the conflict narrative to the same extent as they reject patriarchal rules, and thus tend to promote a culture of peace.²⁵ By the same token, gender-sensitive approaches to mine action reflect the contents of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 of 2000 on Women, Peace and Security²⁶ and UNSCR 2365 (2017).²⁷ The latter encourages stakeholders to take gender roles and women’s and girls’ special needs into consideration in mine action programmes.²⁸

Mine action as a CSBM in the OSCE region

CSBMs cut across the three pillars of the OSCE mandate: security, the economy, and human rights. The 1993 *Stabilizing Measures for Localized Crisis Situations* defines three categories of CSBMs:

- measures to encourage *transparency*, which involve information exchanges and, depending on the circumstances, the assistance of the OSCE acting as a third party
- measures to reinforce *constraint*, which entail the deactivation of specific weapons system and irregular forces, and the disarmament of combatants; and
- measures to reinforce *confidence*, which include the establishment of joint coordination teams to facilitate the resolution of technical military issues.²⁹

Mine action, because it is able to simultaneously offer income-generating work and peacebuilding potential, is more sustainable than infrastructure projects.

Especially protracted ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe could benefit from the implementation of CSBMs. Georgia, Eastern Ukraine, and Nagorno-Karabakh are characterised by limited cross-border cooperation, *othering* processes (whereby a group of people are made to seem fundamentally different), and the perception of the conflict as an existential threat. This led the opposing parties to consider a zero-sum conflict as the only solution. As a result, communities see reconciliation more as a punishment than a compromise.³⁰ The security dilemma persists in all these conflicts and is in part due to the exclusion of a large part of the community from the respective peace processes. In the South Caucasus and Eastern Ukraine, both of which are highly contaminated by mines, minefields act as a barrier to cross-border communications and peacebuilding processes. In the above-mentioned Sri Lanka case, infrastructure building, although being used as a CSBM, was depoliticised and disguised as a development project. Many attempts to build infrastructure in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have ended in failure due to the high cost – in both political and economic terms – that such projects entail. However, mine action, because it is able to simultaneously offer income-generating work and peacebuilding potential, is more sustainable than infrastructure projects.

In Armenia and Azerbaijan the confrontation line and the area surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh are the areas most contaminated by mines. Nagorno-Karabakh, including the surrounding territories, includes 76,373,504 m² of confirmed hazardous areas.³¹ Following the 2014 conflict between the government of Ukraine and the Russian-backed separatist regions in the Crimean Peninsula and in the oblasts of Luhansk and Donetsk, mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO) remained in place mostly along the line of contact, including the buffer zone and the administrative border of Crimea. The real extent of the contaminated area there is still unknown, and one of the reasons is that, whereas Ukraine is a party to the Ottawa Convention, Russia is not. Humanitarian surveys and mine clearance operations are impossible to conduct in the “grey zone” either side of the line of contact. Ukraine has stated that surveys will be possible only once its sovereignty over these areas is restored. Meantime, mines remain in place along the contact line to prevent the risk of a new escalation of fighting despite the signing of a ceasefire on 22 July 2020.³² The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) in Ukraine has confirmed that mine explosions cause most of the casualties and injuries among civilians. Many vital services and much infrastructure, including educational facilities, are located in hazardous areas. Some communities

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have stopped cultivating fields, grazing animals, or collecting resources in some areas due to the presence of mines.³³

Georgia has two critical areas contaminated by mines and UXO: the Red Bridge, a 7-km border between Azerbaijan and Georgia; and in South Ossetia, because of the wars in the 1990s and 2008 between Georgia and Russia-backed South Ossetia. In addition, in 2017 an explosion contaminated the site at Primorsky in Abkhazia. However, the South Ossetia authorities, who are under Russian control, do not permit the Georgian authorities and international NGOs to access the site.³⁴

The OSCE has played a historical role in conflict transformation in all these regions. In Nagorno-Karabakh it brokered the 1994 ceasefire between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and subsequently its mediation role was institutionalised through the Minsk Group co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States.³⁵ OSCE mediation strategies have been characterised by a weak use of the OSCE's policy formulation capacity, due not only to Russia's reluctance to act in a multilateral format, but also to the OSCE's lack of enforcement mechanisms. None of the Minsk Group's proposals on Nagorno-Karabakh has ever materialised, and the OSCE's role has even diminished after the 2020 war. The OSCE could relaunch its role of facilitator by proposing alternative approaches to mine action, on the heels of a promising process started in the 2000s. In 2004 and 2005 the US Department of State implemented the "Beecroft Initiative" consisting of a multilateral programme involving Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. US military personnel conducted joint humanitarian demining training for groups of soldiers and civilians in the three countries. The OSCE proposed a second initiative in October 2002 during a conference in Yerevan. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia suggested the need to depoliticise the issue of landmines, implement a common security strategy, and promote regional cooperation. As a result, the three governments launched a cross-national regional management training initiative. This initiative was crucial to building confidence among participants, to the extent that, when the initiative ended, participants suggested possible cooperation in cross-border mine action projects. In 2005 the OSCE sponsored another workshop in Tbilisi entitled "Confidence-building and Regional Cooperation through Mine Action", with the main purpose of creating a system of open information exchange and establishing regional cooperation. The OSCE suggested including the landmine issue in the negotiations in the Minsk Group, resulting in positive feedback from the governments concerned, while the parties agreed to implement cooperation on mine action.³⁶

Yet OSCE co-chairs have generally refrained from including mine action in the formal mediation process for any conflict so as not to politicise the issue and halt the process.³⁷ However, regional bottom-up initiatives at the regional level have continued. In April 2019 the Landmine Free South Caucasus Campaign took place on the occasion of the International Day for Mine Awareness. The campaign encouraged governments, citizens, academics, and international stakeholders and representatives from the region to integrate and intensify their efforts in the South Caucasus and, especially, to consider the importance of regional approaches to better address the issue of mine contamination.³⁸

In Ukraine the Trilateral Contact Group (TCG) has organised negotiations between the separatist forces and the government of Ukraine, while the SMM monitors ceasefires and holds dialogue with the parties to the conflict.³⁹ With regard to mine action, the OSCE Project co-ordinator is already supporting Ukrainian authorities in conducting MRE and developing educational materials, which were also distributed in non-

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controlled regions. In 2014 the TCG assisted the government in the adoption of a regulatory framework that prohibits the laying of mines close to the contact line and requires the marking of contaminated areas and the removal of existing mines. However, such initiatives are limited in the non-government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.⁴⁰ There is no evidence of any attempts to use mine action as a CSBM in Eastern Ukraine.

The OSCE Mission in Georgia ended on 30 June 2009, 17 years after the outbreak of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. The parties never agreed on a peaceful settlement and eventually the OSCE Mission could not prevent the escalation of tensions, due to its inability to exert pressure on the parties to the conflict. After this withdrawal the OSCE has attempted to establish a new presence in Georgia. So far the OSCE, together with the European Union and the UN, has taken part in the Geneva discussions on the settlement of the conflict in Georgia. Hence, the OSCE is still contributing as an advisor or policy formulator in the light of experience it has gained during many years of negotiations.⁴¹

The OSCE, as a neutral third party with wide knowledge of and experience in the area, is in a good position to propose mine action programmes that, in the form of CoPs, involve communities in the reconstruction process. The OSCE's comprehensive security approach allows the implementation of mine action both as an environmental-economic and human security matter that indirectly benefits the political-security issue. On the heels of the process started in the 2000s, the OSCE could relaunch its role in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus by suggesting the implementation of mine action as a small-scale CSBM. With the support of its Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the OSCE could assist mine action in a separate format from negotiations and without addressing the political issue of the international recognition of de facto entities. At the Track III level, CoPs may offer the possibility of engaging the grassroots population directly in humanitarian and depoliticised cross-border projects by involving locals in MRE, surveying, or information exchange and, when possible, even mine clearance. These activities might also involve women, refugees, IDPs, and former combatants. At the Track II level the OSCE could create a safe space for dialogue on where to establish regional platforms to share new practices and incentivise mutual learning among civil society actors, demining NGOs, experts, and academics.

Conclusion

Even after the cessation of violence following a ceasefire or a peace agreement, landmines still represent a threat for the local population. Many OSCE participating States are highly contaminated by landmines. In protracted conflicts in Eastern Ukraine, Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh the presence of landmines hampers post-war recovery, the return of refugees and cross-borders contacts. The fact that some OSCE countries did not join the Ottawa Convention does not prevent them from addressing the issues of mines in terms of international humanitarian law.

Recent studies have also been considering the positive effects of mine action in conflict transformation efforts. The BHF has been a milestone in this direction because it first linked the humanitarian dimension of mine action with conflict resolution. Such a vision is confirmed by good practices worldwide and a coherent literature on conflict transformation, especially CoP theory, which points out how people engaging daily on projects of common interest produce transformative narratives and build trust.

The OSCE could implement mine action as a CSBM, especially in the context of protracted ethnic conflicts, where the process of peacebuilding is frozen, but tensions are not. The issue of mine action as a CSBM is not unknown to OSCE policies, which have already promoted several good initiatives in this direction, but not to a significant level, due to the fear of halting negotiations to resolve conflicts. To overcome these obstacles the OSCE should depoliticise mine action and implement it on the separate and independent track of conflict transformation. In addition, apart from being a reconciliatory activity, mine action is income generating and empowering for women adversely affected by conflicts and patriarchy. In sum, considering mine action as a CSBM is not only a matter of justice for locals, but also offers the potential for change.

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