



NHSMUN

National High School Model United Nations

Table of Contents

A Note on the NHSMUN Difference.....	3
Position Paper Requirements.....	4
Committee History.....	5

Topic A: Combating Transnational Terrorist Networks.....

Introduction.....	7
History and Description of the Issue.....	8
Current Status.....	16
Bloc Analysis.....	23
Committee Mission.....	26

Topic B: Environmental Rehabilitation in Ukraine.....

Introduction.....	28
History and Description of the Issue.....	29
Current Status.....	38
Bloc Analysis.....	44
Committee Mission.....	46

Research and Preparation Questions.....	48
Important Documents.....	49

A Note on the NHSMUN Difference

Esteemed Faculty and Delegates,

Welcome to NHSMUN 2027! We are Armen Bagdassarian and Sabeeh Mirza, and we are elated to serve as this year's Secretaries-General. Thank you for choosing to attend NHSMUN, the world's largest and most diverse high school Model United Nations conference. As a space for collaboration, consensus, and compromise, NHSMUN strives to transform today's brightest thinkers, speakers, and collaborators into tomorrow's leaders. We believe that an emphasis on education through simulation is paramount to the Model UN experience.

Realism and Accuracy: Although a perfect simulation of the UN is never possible, we believe that one of the core educational responsibilities of MUN conferences is to educate students about how the UN System works. We strive to invite real UN, NGO, and field experts into each committee through our committee speakers program. Moreover, we arrange meetings between students and the actual UN Permanent Mission of the country they are representing. These exclusive resources are only available due to IMUNA's formal association with the United Nations Department of Global Communications and consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. No other conference goes so far to deeply immerse students into the UN System.

Educational Emphasis: At the heart of NHSMUN lies education and compromise. Part of what makes NHSMUN special is its diverse delegate base. As such, when NHSMUN distributes awards, we strongly de-emphasize their importance in comparison to the educational value of Model UN. In particular, our daises look for and promote constructive leadership and diplomacy that strive toward consensus, as real ambassadors do in the United Nations.

Research and a Dedicated Staff: Our staffers care deeply about delegates' experiences and what they take away from their time at NHSMUN. Our Directors spend over six months preparing Background Guides, in addition to Update Briefs written to reflect the rapidly changing nature of the topics to be discussed. Our staffers are trained rigorously to provide the best conference experience possible. Our daises provide thoughtful comments on submitted position papers. Our staff aims to tailor the committee experience to delegates' reflections and research, but also to facilitate an environment where all delegates' thoughts can be heard.

Empowering Participation: The UN relies on the voices of all of its member states to create resolutions. This is our philosophy at NHSMUN too. Our Rules of Procedure and our staff focus on making every voice in the committee heard, regardless of country assignment or skill level. Additionally, unlike many other conferences, we also emphasize delegate participation after the conference. Delegates spend countless hours researching topics critical to the UN and broader international sphere.

Delegates, it is our sincerest hope that your time at NHSMUN will be thought-provoking and stimulating. NHSMUN is an incredible time to learn, grow, and embrace new opportunities. We look forward to seeing you work both as students and global citizens at the conference.

Best,

Armen Bagdassarian
Secretary-General

Sabeeh Mirza
Secretary-General

Position Paper Requirements

Delegate research and preparation is a critical element of attending NHSMUN and enjoying the debate experience. We have provided this Background Guide to introduce the topics that will be discussed in your committee. We encourage and expect each of you to critically explore the selected topics and be able to identify and analyze their intricacies upon arrival to the conference.

The task of preparing for the conference can be challenging. To assist delegates, we have updated our [Beginner Delegate Guide](#) and [Advanced Delegate Guide](#). These guides contain more detailed instructions on how to prepare a position paper and excellent sources that delegates can use for research. Use these resources to your advantage. They can help transform a sometimes overwhelming task into what it should be: an engaging, interesting, and rewarding experience.

To accurately represent a country, delegates must be able to articulate its policies. Accordingly, NHSMUN requires each delegation (the one or two delegates representing a country in a committee) to write a position paper for each topic on the committee's agenda. More information about how to write and format position papers can be found in the [Research Guide](#). To summarize, position papers should be structured into three sections.

I: Topic Background – This section should describe the history of the topic as it would be described by the delegate's country. Delegates do not need to give an exhaustive account of the topic, but rather focus on the details that are most important to the delegation's policy and proposed solutions.

II: Country Policy – This section should discuss the delegation's policy regarding the topic. Each paper should state the policy in plain terms and include the relevant statements, statistics, and research that support the effectiveness of the policy. Comparisons with other global issues are also appropriate here.

III. Proposed Solutions – This section should detail the delegation's proposed solutions to address the topic. Descriptions of each solution should be thorough. Each idea should clearly connect to the specific problem it aims to solve and identify potential obstacles to implementation and how they can be avoided. The solution should be a natural extension of the country's policy.

Each topic's position paper should be **no more than 10 pages long** double-spaced with standard margins and 12 point font size. This is a maximum; **3–5 pages per topic is often a suitable length**. The paper must be written from the perspective of your assigned country and should articulate the policies you will espouse at the conference.

Each delegation is responsible for submitting position papers on or before **February 26, 2027**. If a delegate wishes to receive detailed feedback from the committee's dais, their position paper must be submitted on or before **February 5, 2027**. The papers received by this earlier deadline will be reviewed by the committee dais and returned before February 26. Instructions on how to submit position papers will be shared directly with faculty advisors.

Submission instructions for position papers will be sent to faculty advisers via email. If delegations are unable to submit their position papers on time, please contact us at nhsmun@imuna.org.

Delegations that do not submit position papers will be ineligible for awards.

Committee History

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe traces its roots to the early 1970s, when hostility between the Communist bloc of Eastern Europe and Western countries was transitioning into what became known as the *détente*, or “cooling,” period of Cold War tensions. The arrival of the *détente* phase made Western leaders more open to the concept of negotiations with the Soviet bloc, inspiring the countries of Europe to meet, first in the Helsinki Consultations of 1972 and again at the formal opening of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in the summer of 1973.¹

After meeting for two years in Geneva and Helsinki, all countries of Europe (except for Albania), as well as Canada and the United States, came to agreement on the Helsinki Final Act, which was signed two years later in August 1975. The Act contained a series of commitments to dealing with politico-military, economic, environmental, and human rights issues across Europe, as well as “the Helsinki Decalogue.” This Decalogue introduced a series of 10 principles centered on state sovereignty and universal equality and emphasized the importance of peace and compliance with international law.² 35 initial states signed the Helsinki Final Act. The CSCE continued to meet throughout the 1970s and 1980s. These meetings served, though limited in scope, as a place where the divided blocs of the Warsaw Pact and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization could meet and foster dialogue with non-affiliated states in the OSCE, effectively acting as intermediaries.³

The importance of the CSCE, as a conference spanning the geographical and ideological boundaries of Europe, grew as tensions cooled and the Soviet Union gradually collapsed. Prior to the Paris Summit of November 1990, the CSCE had functioned as a series of conferences wherein member states would further their established commitments and examine these commitments’ implementation in various regions.⁴ By 1990, however, with a newly democratic Russia coming into fruition, the CSCE took on a much larger role in international affairs.

The Charter of Paris for a New Europe, signed at the Paris Summit, established the CSCE as a permanent regional body of Europe. The principles of maintaining peace and security in Europe would shape the dynamic of European relations in decades to come.⁵ The body was further legitimized from 1990 through 1994. The organization would contain a parliament, a secretary, and various other internal offices. It would also change its name from the CSCE to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or the OSCE, in late 1994.⁶

Throughout the 1990s, the OSCE became increasingly tied to the United Nations. It came to recognize itself as a regional arrangement of the UN in 1992, and developed a framework for cooperation and coordination between the two bodies the following year.⁷ Recognizing the UN Security Council (UNSC) as the primary body for the preservation of peace and security internationally, the OSCE views the UNSC as its primary partner body and has assisted the UNSC since the 1990s in various efforts, including peacekeeping, free and fair elections, and counterterrorism.⁸

1 “Helsinki Final Act, 1975 - 1969-1976 - Milestones - Office of the Historian,” Helsinki Final Act, 1975 - 1969-1976 - Milestones - Office of the Historian, accessed 13 June 2024, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/helsinki>.

2 “OSCE,” Signing of the Helsinki Final Act, accessed 13 June 2024, <http://www.osce.org/who/43960>.

3 “Helsinki Final Act, 1975 - 1969-1976 - Milestones - Office of the Historian.”

4 “Charter of Paris for a New Europe,” U.S. Department of State, accessed 13 June 2024, <http://www.state.gov/t/isn/4721.htm>.

5 “Charter of Paris for a New Europe,”

6 Helsinki Final Act, 1975 - 1969-1976 - Milestones - Office of the Historian.”

7 Factsheet: What Is the OSCE?” Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, accessed 13 June 2024, <http://www.osce.org/secretariat/35775>.

8 “Factsheet: What Is the OSCE?”

TOPIC A

Combating Transnational Terrorist Networks

OSCE | NHSMUN 2027



Photo Credit: Master Sgt. Mark Olsen/New Jersey National Guard

Introduction

Terrorism is the use or threat of violence to create fear among a wider population and achieve a political objective.¹ Transnational terrorism takes this threat across national borders. This is different from the traditional model, where one group worked inside one state for a local cause. These networks can recruit people in one country, move funds through another, and carry out attacks in a third. This makes them harder to track and disrupt. Unlike groups that operate within one state, transnational networks depend on connections across borders.² No single country in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) region can fully address this threat alone. Cooperation between states is essential to disrupt these networks and prevent future attacks.

Terrorism moved from a mostly local problem to a transnational one as state support dried up after the Cold War. This pushed many groups to build independent networks that could operate across borders.³ The clearest turning point came on September 11, 2001, when 19 al-Qaeda hijackers seized four commercial airplanes and carried out planned attacks in the United States (US), killing nearly 3,000 people.⁴ In addition to the death toll, the September 11 attacks showed that a small, non-state network was capable of carrying out a large-scale attack. Governments responded by strengthening aviation security, expanding intelligence sharing, and creating new systems to monitor international travel. These changes also pushed the OSCE to adopt its first counter-terrorism framework later that year.⁵

Today, the people affected by this problem go far beyond the victims of a single attack. Civilians in target states face direct violence, while states along transit and migration routes face additional security challenges. These states must track foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs), funds, and weapons moving across their borders. For example, after the territorial defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL; sometimes known as ISIS), many FTFs and their families were left in camps in Iraq and Syria, creating difficult questions about who should be prosecuted or sent back to their home country. Children born in these conflict zones may also

spend years without clear legal status or a way to return home.⁶ As a result, every state, whether directly affected by an attack or not, can feel the effects of decisions made by other participating states. Insufficient or nonexistent terrorist policy in one part of the network can undermine efforts made elsewhere.

More recently, two developments have made these networks even harder to address. First, the collapse of terrorist groups' territorial control has made it harder for states to track and manage individuals connected to these groups after their defeat. Second, new technologies, including encrypted apps, propaganda generated by artificial intelligence (AI), and drones, have lowered the barriers that only large, organized groups were capable of overcoming.⁷ This has increased the potential for terrorist networks to operate across borders.

Therefore, combating transnational terrorist networks is becoming increasingly harder. This is not because states disagree that terrorism is dangerous. It is because every solution runs into the same obstacles. States must decide how much intelligence to share with partners they may not fully trust. They must weigh fast security action against real risks to privacy. There is rarely a perfect solution. Measures that improve security can also limit individual freedoms, while stronger privacy protections may reduce the

information available to prevent attacks. Strong tools built to catch terrorists can just as easily be misused against civilians. Additionally, states face real gaps in capacity. A policy that one country can quickly enforce may be impossible for another with less training, technology, or funding. However, this problem can be better addressed when multiple countries, agencies, and organizations come together to respond to these transnational terrorist groups.

History and Description of the Issue

EVOLUTION OF TERRORISM FROM DOMESTIC TO TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS

Over the past decades, terrorism has changed from a largely domestic issue into a global security challenge. Improvements in international travel, communication, and financial systems have allowed terrorist organizations to recruit members, move money, and coordinate attacks across multiple countries.⁸ For most of the 20th century, militant groups operated within a single country's space. This meant that their violence and plans stayed inside the borders of a country. These older methods of terrorism focused on local issues, including regional civil wars, separatist movements, and territorial disputes.⁹

Examples include the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland from the 1960s to the 1990s and the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain from the 1950s to the 2010s.¹⁰ The goals of these organizations were mainly focused toward changing or gaining independence from their own governments and national security forces in a specific region rather than carrying out attacks across the world. A single group of leaders issued commands down a clear military chain. Their funds were also local, relying on bank robberies or community extortion, where they would take money from the people around them.¹¹

During the 1970s and the 1980s, some groups avoided risks by relying on state sponsorship.¹² Throughout the Cold War, several governments secretly supported militant organizations by providing weapons, funding, intelligence, training camps, and safe havens. They did this so they did not have to enter direct conflict. Instead of fighting directly, states began to use terrorist groups as proxy forces to weaken their rivals while reducing the risk of open and public conflict.¹³ This support gave militant groups access to resources. This included advanced weapons, training bases, and official documents, allowing them to expand their operations more easily. In exchange, using proxy groups provided opportunities for states to achieve their political agenda while avoiding any direct consequences or war.¹⁴

The end of the Cold War changed this relationship. International pressure against supporting terrorism increased, and many governments reduced their assistance.¹⁵ This forced militant groups to find new ways to survive on their own again while having an established network regionally.¹⁶ Many groups turned to organized crime, kidnapping for ransom, illicit trafficking, extortion, and private donations to replace the financial support they lost. This shift helped create the self-sustaining transnational networks we see today.¹⁷ These new funding sources allowed groups to operate with less dependence on governments. Over time, they developed networks that could raise money, recruit members, and move resources across borders on their own.

At the same time, governments strengthened their own security systems. They invested in local policing, surveillance, and cooperation between courts and law enforcement.¹⁸ As national security systems improved, terrorist groups faced greater difficulty operating within a single country. To avoid these stronger national systems, some groups began spreading their operations across borders. They spread their logistics, funds, and training cells across multiple countries.¹⁹ By breaking up their operations

Rubble from the 9/11 attacks still burning two days later

Credit: Mike Goad



across several countries, terrorist organizations became more difficult to stop.²⁰ This created a geographic safety shield. If investigators or governmental authorities broke up a terrorist cell in one country, the rest of the group survived across the border. Thus, networks began treating borders as operational openings to exploit legal gaps rather than as barriers to their movement.²¹

Another major turning point in modern transnational terrorism occurred on September 11, 2001. A group of 19 al-Qaeda terrorists took over four commercial airplanes and crashed two of them into the World Trade Center in New York City, one into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the other in Pennsylvania. The attack killed nearly 3,000 people from more than 90 countries, making it one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in history.²² This demonstrated the limits of existing international security systems, which were not designed to detect such a dispersed operation.²³ Most importantly, the attack changed global counterterrorism policy as governments began expanding their counterterrorism efforts and policies. Many of these measures remain in place today.²⁴

The history of al-Qaeda also shows how terrorist organizations changed after 2001. Under increased military pressure and international attention, al-Qaeda's central leadership had to limit their involvement and planning in direct attacks. After 9/11, al-Qaeda relied more heavily on their regional networks to continue their operations and political agenda. While this caused the group to become more dispersed and independent from each other, the organization survived even when senior leaders were captured and killed.²⁵ This model later influenced other terrorist organizations, including the Islamic State (ISIS). Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS combined territorial control with extensive online recruitment throughout the 2010s to gain control over large areas in Iraq and Syria. By encouraging attacks through online propaganda and messaging platforms, ISIS showed that terrorist organizations no longer needed a physical presence in every country they targeted.²⁶

This decentralized structure makes modern terrorist networks far more difficult to dismantle than earlier organizations. As a result, investigators must work across different legal systems and intelligence frameworks before they

can fully disrupt the network. Modern terrorist organizations use international borders, digital technologies, and financial systems to continue operating despite stronger domestic and international enforcement. Countries and regions continue to work together to share information, coordinate border management, and interrupt illegal cash flows to these organizations in hopes of preventing future attacks, protecting public safety, and upholding the rule of law. Effective counterterrorism also requires an understanding of how these networks obtain funding, move resources, and maintain their operations across borders.²⁷ Additionally, as terrorist groups faced intense police and government pressure at home, regional groups became even more interested in expanding across borders.²⁸ Governments and policymakers must strike a careful balance. They must put policies and measures in place to discourage and stop terrorist groups, but to also not cause these groups to expand their operations even further across borders when they face restrictions. This is where collaboration and consistency are key, so that every border and country has the same checks and balances in place against these unlawful behaviors.

FINANCING AND LOGISTICS OF TERRORIST NETWORKS

Terrorist organizations require steady funding to recruit members, purchase weapons, produce propaganda, arrange travel and shipments, maintain safe houses, and carry out attacks. Without reliable financial support, even well-organized terrorist networks struggle to sustain long-term operations. In the past, these networks relied heavily on major banks and cash drops to move funds across borders. However, stronger banking regulations made it harder to move large amounts of money without attracting attention. In response, modern groups changed their financial tactics. In response, terrorist groups began using less traditional ways to transfer funds. Informal value transfer systems allow people to send money through trusted intermediaries without directly moving cash between bank

accounts. Virtual assets can also allow funds to be transferred digitally across borders, while online platforms can help groups collect and move money through less traditional channels. These methods can make financial activity harder for authorities to trace and disrupt. As a result, terrorist networks can continue funding their operations even under greater international financial pressure.²⁹

These changes also made it harder for governments to follow the flow of money through terrorist networks. Because these networks can operate across several countries, governments have had to change how they track them. To understand these groups, experts use network theory, which studies how people and organizations are connected. Instead of viewing a terrorist organization as one large group with a clear chain of command, analysts can view it as a network of connected points, known as nodes.³⁰ A node could be a member, a financial supporter, a communication system, or a local cell. The connections between these nodes show how information, money, and resources move through the network. This approach helps investigators identify important connections and determine which parts of a network may be most important to disrupt. If one node is removed, other nodes may still allow the network to continue operating. This makes decentralized terrorist groups harder to dismantle than organizations that depend on a single leader or location.³¹

Network analysis also helps investigators identify key financial facilitators and communication hubs within terrorist organizations. By disrupting critical nodes, authorities can weaken the network without having to eliminate every member. However, stronger financial controls also forced terrorist networks to adapt. In 1989, major countries set up the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to combat international money laundering. Its focus expanded after 2001 to target terrorist funds.³² As banking rules tightened, transnational networks found new ways to move money across borders. This pushed some terrorist groups toward the

same illegal markets used by organized crime. In regions with weak border controls or war, terrorist groups began acting like criminal firms. They joined illegal markets like drug sales, weapons trades, and smuggling.³³

By joining the global criminal economy, transnational cells achieved financial independence. In areas with weak border controls, these groups can use their skills and networks to participate in criminal markets and generate a steady source of income. This allows cells operating near the European security zone to remain self-funded.³⁴ They can use the profits made by crime syndicates abroad to buy standard supplies locally. Groups can also move these funds through informal financial systems. One important example is hawala, a trust-based system that allows money to be transferred between countries without directly moving cash across borders.³⁵

More specifically, in conflict zones and frontier regions, networks frequently rely on the hawala system to bypass international banking controls. Instead of using wire transfers or physical bank branches, this network relies entirely on a grid of local brokers known as hawaladars.³⁶ In a hawala system, a sender gives cash to a broker in one country, and that broker contacts a partner in the recipient's country to distribute the equivalent amount. No money actually crosses physical borders during the transaction. Instead, the brokers settle their balances later through traded goods, cash smuggling, or service swaps. This decentralized network entirely bypasses standard banking reports. Because hawala transactions often leave little formal documentation and are difficult for financial investigators to detect, this is an ideal system for terrorist organizations. In areas with poor state control, it provides even deeper anonymity.³⁷

While traditional systems help move funds locally, networks also exploit new digital technologies to secure global income. The rise of decentralized virtual assets has created new paths for terrorist financing.³⁸ Some actors use privacy-focused

cryptocurrencies or digital wallets that are not managed by financial institutions, making it more difficult to identify the people behind transactions.³⁹

However, digital currencies have not replaced traditional forms of terrorist financing. The FATF found that terrorist organizations still rely heavily on cash, hawala networks, and other informal financial systems. Instead, digital currencies are often used alongside traditional funding methods.⁴⁰ In addition to crypto tokens, modern networks deploy decentralized online crowdfunding models to raise capital. This is when terrorist groups hide behind fake humanitarian logos or community aid projects on social media platforms.⁴¹ They post emotional appeals, donation links, or codes to gather micro-contributions from global donors. These small individual donations pass easily under standard banking alarms because the individual amounts look harmless. Once collected, the funds are pooled into digital wallets and routed through regional financial hubs. This model allows central leaders to collect wealth globally and distribute it quietly to self-funded cells.⁴²

In addition to raising money, these online campaigns can spread extremist propaganda and identify potential recruits. This allows terrorist organizations to strengthen both their financial resources and their recruitment efforts at the same time.⁴³ Once groups secure these cross-border funds, they divide the capital across specific operational targets. Many assume that most funding goes directly toward buying weapons or staging attacks. However, intelligence tracking shows that tactical strikes are often the least expensive part of a network's budget. Instead, transnational networks direct a massive share of their wealth into sustaining their organizational infrastructure. They spend heavily on global recruitment campaigns and professional digital media units. These media units produce high-quality propaganda videos, magazines, and radicalizing materials to attract new followers online.⁴⁴

Modern networks also use their funds to establish control over physical territories and local populations. In weak or failed states, terrorist groups act like shadow governments. They use their illicit wealth to fund basic public services. ISIS used revenue from oil sales, taxation, and extortion to finance public services in territory under its control while continuing to recruit fighters and conduct military operations.⁴⁵ These services might include distributing food, running local courts, and building basic infrastructure.⁴⁶ By providing these services the groups win the loyalty of local communities who feel abandoned by their central governments. This community support creates a safe haven where the network can operate freely. Finally, groups use their funds to pay steady salaries to their full-time fighters and support the families of recruited operatives. This financial safety net ensures long-term organizational loyalty.⁴⁷

Ultimately, these combined financial tactics have created severe tracking gaps for international security forces. Many countries show structural weakness in their ability to track, stop, and convict terrorist financing cases.⁴⁸ Transnational groups move fluidly between hawala cash networks and digital assets to keep their logistics safe from state tracking. This mix of old and new payment styles makes it easy for threat networks to avoid sanctions and counterterrorism efforts. As long as these cross-border channels remain open, decentralized threat networks can successfully sustain operations across global lines.

TECHNOLOGY, ONLINE RADICALIZATION, AND RECRUITMENT

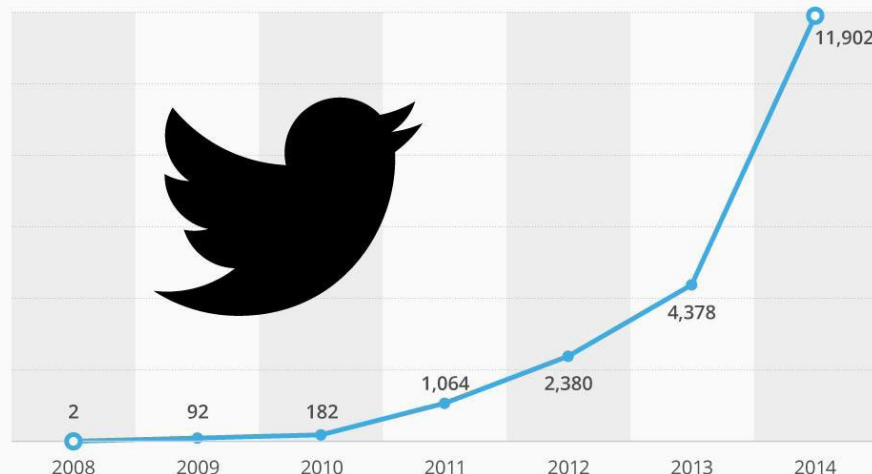
The fast growth of personal technology has changed how global threat groups find new followers. It has also changed how they control them. In the past, recruiting someone needed face-to-face meetings, safe houses, and local handlers. Today, modern networks use digital tools instead. They reach youth across the globe without ever meeting them in person. This lack of contact protects top recruiters from the police. At the same time, it lets networks expand their reach deep into foreign nations. Threat networks now use everyday digital spaces. They target young people directly, on the devices they use every day, making the internet one of the most important tools for modern, transnational terrorist organizations.⁴⁹

To capture the attention of younger audiences, extremist networks spread their narratives into mainstream consumer culture. Recruiters actively manipulate the content feeds on public social media platforms. They push tailored political videos to at-risk users. Researchers have found that recommendation algorithms can unintentionally increase exposure to extremist content by suggesting content similar to what a user has already viewed. Although technology companies have strengthened content censorship, extremist groups continue to adapt by creating new accounts and changing their messaging.⁵⁰ Hence, the persistence and adaptability of terrorist groups continue to guide users deeper into radical circles. Groups also weaponize popular memes, trending music

ISIS used revenue from oil sales, taxation, and extortion to finance public services in territory under its control.

ISIS Is Expanding Its Reach On Twitter

Pro-ISIS Twitter accounts created by year



Twitter (now X) accounts sympathetic to ISIL surged in the run up to their 2014 invasion of Iraq

Credit: Forbes



Source: Brookings Institute

Forbes statista

tracks, and internet humor to make extremist ideas seem normal and harmless.⁵¹ This cultural camouflage makes it difficult for young people to realize they are interacting with international threat groups.

A main tactic used by modern threat networks is gamification. Some extremist groups have exploited online gaming platforms and gaming communities to communicate with potential recruits and spread propaganda, such as creating role-play worlds inside popular games like Roblox.⁵² Within these custom digital worlds, networks recreate historic battles or simulate real-world attacks. Young players interact with these spaces as a form of entertainment. However, the game structures slowly introduce group-based hatred and extreme political views. Networks link extreme ideas to fun digital rewards and peer praise. In this way, they reshape how young users view violence.⁵³

Beyond standard gaming platforms, advanced networks exploit private online communities to isolate youth. Recruiters invite interested players away from public servers and move them into private, unmonitored digital rooms. In these

private online spaces, people interact through anonymous avatars. This setup removes real-world social barriers and creates a powerful sense of digital belonging, forming tight online echo chambers.⁵⁴ Groups also use generative AI content tools to produce huge amounts of propaganda rapidly. These tools can instantly translate messages into dozens of languages. They can also alter voice recordings and create realistic fake images. This fast content-making allows small terrorist cells to copy the output of a big media company.⁵⁵

A major shift in modern online recruitment is the “convergence of harm” within youth-centric networks. Security agencies say that younger recruits are rarely drawn in by complex political or religious writings. Instead, modern global cells use scattered, hopeless online networks. In these networks, extreme beliefs mix directly with cybercrime, severe bullying, and self-harm.⁵⁶ Recruiters exploit the emotional and developmental vulnerabilities of socially isolated minors. They then use targeted online grooming tactics to build trust before slowly introducing extreme political or religious beliefs.

Once inside these closed groups, violence and online cruelty are treated as status symbols. Minors are pushed to perform digital or physical tasks to gain rank within the group ledger. These tasks can range from spreading hate speech online, filming violent acts, local vandalism, or animal abuse. This slow exposure numbs young users to violence and hate. Threat networks blend international political goals with dark and chaotic internet culture. In this way, they build strong mental control over their targets. This makes it very hard for child services or anti-terror units to spot early warning signs.⁵⁷

Networks build highly structured cross-platform funnels to turn online sympathy into real-world action. This plan moves a target step through different layers of the internet. The process starts in very public video applications. There, recruiters find new followers. Once a target shows interest, the recruiter tells them to move to a private coded app like Telegram.⁵⁸ This shift breaks the tracking trail for law enforcement agencies. Inside these hidden chat groups, the network provides the target with direct operational training. This training includes downloading digital attack manuals, reading bomb-making guides, and choosing local targets.

This borderless method has fueled a major rise in youth-led, lone-actor radicalization networks. Modern networks no longer need to send foreign fighters to launch strikes inside a targeted country. Instead central leaders act as remote managers who oversee decentralized cells from afar.⁵⁹ This operational design allows individuals to plan, fund, and launch low-cost strikes inside their own home countries without any physical overlap with the core group. Because these young actors operate entirely alone in the real world, they leave no traditional physical clues. This digital isolation creates severe blind spots for domestic counterterrorism units.⁶⁰

A clear example of how online radicalization can contribute to terrorism was the November 2015 Paris attacks. The attackers were linked to ISIS, which had used social media platforms,

encrypted messaging applications, and online propaganda to recruit supporters across Europe. The coordinated attacks targeted the Bataclan Concert Hall, restaurants, and the Stade de France, killing 130 people and injuring hundreds more. The attacks demonstrated how extremist organizations could use digital platforms to inspire, recruit, and coordinate individuals across multiple countries before carrying out large-scale terrorist attacks.⁶¹

To counter this fluid threat, international security bodies emphasize the critical need for media literacy and digital defense. Traditional border security and physical surveillance are no longer enough to stop these virtual networks. Instead, nations must build strong digital media literacy programs to help young users spot online manipulation tactics early.⁶² Governments must also collaborate closely with private technology firms to identify and remove cross-platform funnels before they can guide youth toward violence. As long as these digital spaces remain unmonitored, transnational threat networks will continue to exploit global tech to bypass state laws and recruit the next generation.

EVOLUTION OF THE OSCE COUNTERTERRORISM FRAMEWORK

The modern anti-terrorism system of the OSCE was created after the September 11 attacks. The OSCE adopted the 2001 Bucharest Plan of Action for Combating Terrorism. This marked the organization's transition from a primarily discussion forum into a more active operational body.⁶³ This early plan focused heavily on urgent, state-based defense measures. Under the pressure after 9/11, member states pledged to strengthen criminal law, protect critical infrastructure, and limit the movement of terrorists and terrorist financing across borders.⁶⁴

During this first era, international cooperation was mostly reactive. It was driven by threats and focused on hard security. The Bucharest Plan pushed states to quickly join the 12 anti-terrorism treaties in force at the time. However,

because this early approach was built as an emergency response, it suffered from structural fragmentation. The OSCE lacked a central administrative department to run these mandates, relying instead on ad-hoc ministerial decisions and voluntary implementation.⁶⁵

Moreover, this early state-focused plan often created an imbalance between aggressive security operations and the protection of fundamental human rights. The urgent focus on border controls, fake document detection, and cargo security sometimes raised concerns about the protection of civil liberties and due process.⁶⁶ The Bucharest Plan did lay the groundwork for future help, like helping states write national anti-terrorism laws. But over the next ten years, it became clear that this scattered, reactive model could not keep up with rapidly evolving transnational terrorist networks.

The international threat landscape kept changing. From central groups like al-Qaeda to highly linked, transnational networks that used the internet and illicit trade paths. Because of this shift, the OSCE's administrative structure became outdated. Security challenges could no longer be treated one at a time, on their own. In response to this changing environment, member states adopted Ministerial Council Decision No. 9/11 to Address Transnational Threats.⁶⁷ This decision authorized a major structural reorganization of the organization's internal security architecture.

The primary operational outcome of Decision No. 9/11 was the launch of the Transnational Threats Department (TNTD) on January 1, 2012.

The TNTD was specifically designed to break down walls between teams. It combined separate security teams under a shared command. The department merged three portfolios: the Action Against Terrorism Unit (ATU), the Border Security and Management Unit (BSMU), and the Strategic Police Matters Unit (SPMU). It also expanded cooperation on cyber, information, and communication technology (ICT) security as these threats became increasingly linked to terrorism and organized crime.⁶⁸

This structural consolidation changed how the OSCE provided technical help and built skills among member states. Instead of running separate, stand-alone programs, the TNTD let the OSCE treat cross-border threats through an integrated lens. For instance, border security training was combined with advanced anti-terrorism policing and digital forensics instruction. By acting as a central focal point, the TNTD gave the OSCE the efficiency and speed required to track and counter modern, multi-dimensional threats across its 57 participating states.⁶⁹

This institutional reorganization opened the door for a major shift in a regional counter-terrorism strategy. In December 2012, after more than a year of intense diplomatic negotiations, the participating states approved Permanent Council Decision No. 1063. This adopted the OSCE Consolidated Framework for the Fight against Terrorism.⁷⁰ This framework brought years of separate political decisions together into one clear vision.⁷¹ It marked a definitive transition from the reactive, state-based model of 2001 into a preventive plan that treated security as an

This scattered, reactive model could not keep up with rapidly evolving transnational terrorist networks.

integrated system.

The 2012 Consolidated Framework restated the OSCE's core idea: security should be shared, broad, joint, and whole. It emphasized that true, lasting stability cannot be achieved through hard military or policing actions alone. Instead, it requires equal attention to the human, economic, and environmental dimensions that terrorist networks use to expand their reach.⁷² Under this wider view, the plan focused on finding and fixing the root causes of radicalization. These causes include human rights abuses, political exclusion, and ongoing corruption.

Guided by the Consolidated Framework, the OSCE transformed itself into a key platform for cooperation between participating member states and international organizations. The framework aligned the OSCE's regional capabilities with the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, ensuring that regional efforts supported broader international objectives.⁷³ To strengthen this cooperation, the OSCE signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding and Biennial Action Plan with the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).⁷⁴ This partnership allows for joint field assessments, shared border tracking exercises, and synchronized technical assistance programs. Together, these steps cut down on duplicated efforts between regional and global bodies and increase efficiency between them.

The OSCE's modern approach prioritizes building real skills within civil society and local border communities, rather than just within central government ministries. Through the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the organization conducts detailed human-rights checks of domestic law enforcement agencies.⁷⁵ ODIHR regularly publishes comprehensive operation manuals and runs training programs for criminal justice officials. This helps field officers stop terrorist travel, disrupt illegal financial flows, and counter online recruitment, while respecting fundamental rights and the rule of law. This OSCE framework

offers a balanced, multi-dimensional response built to protect the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian region from ever-changing cross-border threats. As terrorist threats continue to evolve, maintaining and adapting this cooperative approach will be crucial for protecting security.

Current Status

FOREIGN TERRORIST FIGHTERS (FTFS)

"Foreign terrorist fighters," or FTFs, is the term for people who travel to another country to join a terror group, plan an attack, or help carry one out. This is different from supporting or fighting for a cause in your country.⁷⁶ A key part of the law that addresses FTFs is the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2396, adopted in 2017. Before this resolution, countries mainly focused on stopping FTFs from traveling to conflict zones. Resolution 2396 shifted that focus. It made countries think about new and harder questions. Countries began to consider how to handle or prosecute FTFs when they return to their home country.⁷⁷

Resolution 2396 calls on every UN member state to build strategies for prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration of FTFs. Together, these are known as "PRR." This applies not just to former fighters, but also to family members who may have traveled with them or been born in conflict zones.⁷⁸ It also requires states to collect biometric data and share watchlists. This strengthens international cooperation to spot threats early.⁷⁹ At the same time, it stresses that these measures must respect international law and human rights.⁸⁰ Since its adoption, this resolution has shaped the main plan that the UN, the OSCE, and many governments now use. It guides how they handle the return of foreign fighters and their families.⁸¹

Some states have taken action to bring their citizens home from camps in northeast Syria. Others continue to delay or limit returns because

of legal, political, or security concerns.⁸² It has been six years since the military defeat of ISIL, a terrorist jihadist organization responsible for many global attacks. But the camps of northeast Syria are still one of the most unsolved challenges in global counter-terrorism. As of July 2025, more than 30,000 people are still held in the Al Hol camp and nearby sites. Conditions of these camps are harsh. Many people held there have never been criminally charged with a crime. Many have never seen a judge.⁸³ About 8,500 are foreign nationals from more than 62 countries. Most are women and children. In fact, about 60 percent of the whole camp population is under 18 years old. Most of them are under 12 years old. Some children remain with their families; others are orphaned or have been separated from their families.⁸⁴ The UN has emphasized that repatriation, providing rehabilitation, and helping them return to their home country are all important parts of long-term plans to stop terrorism in this area.⁸⁵

Iraq has carried out the largest repatriation effort so far. More than 17,000 of its nationals from Al Hol and other detention sites have been brought home through a series of organized operations.⁸⁶ The UN has welcomed these efforts as an

important example of international cooperation. Also, emphasizing that repatriation should be accompanied by fair trials, rehabilitation, and continued monitoring.⁸⁷ Despite this progress, thousands of foreign nationals remain in the camps, and many countries have yet to establish clear policies for their return.

Central Asian states have taken a more active approach than most. Uzbekistan is one of the clearest examples. Since 2019, it has carried out five repatriation operations, bringing home 531 people, including 331 children, from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁸⁸ These returnees come with real support. These operations focus on rehabilitation and reintegration programs for children and families, rather than punishment alone. To build on this, the OSCE and Central Asian governments set up the Regional Expert Council on Rehabilitation and Reintegration in 2024. The Council shares best practices between countries. It has already helped support the return of more than 2,100 citizens across the region.⁸⁹

Regional cooperation matters because no country can solve this problem by itself. Returning foreign terrorist fighters often create challenges that affect more than one country.⁹⁰

al-Hol Camp in Syria

Credit: Y. Boechat (VOA)



Different national policies can also make it harder to share information, manage borders, and support rehabilitation efforts.⁹¹ To help address these gaps, the OSCE launched Project PRR in 2025. The project supports countries in developing prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration strategies that protect public security while respecting human rights. It starts by identifying each country's needs. It then helps governments review their laws and institutions. After that, offering training and technical support. Through this work, the OSCE strengthens cooperation and promotes more consistent responses across the region.⁹²

Prisons have become another important front in this fight. When former fighters are prosecuted, prisons can increase risk of radicalization or create opportunities for further recruitment if they are not managed carefully.⁹³ The UN first responded to this risk back in 2016.⁹⁴ That year, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) published its first comprehensive handbook on managing violent extremist prisoners and preventing radicalization in prisons. The handbook provides guidance on risk assessment, prisoner classification, rehabilitation programs, and strategies to prevent recruitment inside prisons. Today, UNODC continues to support countries across the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and other regions in strengthening prison management and rehabilitation programs based on these principles.⁹⁵

Even with these international frameworks in place, countries have responded very differently to returning FTFs and their families. Research shows that a country's policies are not based solely on security concerns. Domestic politics, public opinion, and the government's ability to handle these cases can also shape these decisions. Some governments have chosen to prosecute former fighters. Others have focused on rehabilitation and helping them return to society. However, some governments have delayed repatriation. Others have handled each case separately instead of one clear policy for everyone.⁹⁶

Kosovo is one of the best-known examples of a country taking action early. It began preparing for the return of its citizens from Islamic States and detention centers as early as 2017. Its Ministry of Interior created a dedicated unit for this work, called the Division for the Prevention and Reintegration of Radicalized Individuals.⁹⁷ Kosovo built recovery and return-to-society work directly into its National Strategy against Terrorism, which ran from 2018 through 2023. The plan used different approaches for adults and families. Adults could face criminal charges. At the same time, returnees and their families could receive ongoing mental health support, schooling, and help rebuilding their communities.⁹⁸ Other countries have instead used a different approach. They strip FTFs of their citizenship to avoid the return question altogether. Researchers argue this does not remove the risk. Instead, it moves the responsibility to another country or international group that may have to deal with the person later.⁹⁹

Taken together, the current picture shows real but uneven progress. The tools and guidelines already exist. OSCE Project PRR, ODIHR's human rights guidelines, the UNODC prison handbook, and the Central Asian Regional Expert Council all show that countries can work on security while also protecting human rights. However, participating countries continue to apply these tools in very different ways. Thousands of women and children remain in camps without a long-term solution. As long as they remain there, both the humanitarian and security challenges are likely to continue.

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND TERRORIST ADAPTATION

Terrorist groups have adapted technologies to improve their operations. Today, these technologies include AI, encrypted messaging platforms, drones, and cyber tools. These tools were created initially for civilian purposes. Now, terrorist groups are using them to evade detection, communicate securely, and

expand their operations. The UN has warned that this problem is only worsening. Violent extremist groups are already using AI to create propaganda, translate messages into multiple languages, and spread disinformation. Advancements in technology have allowed this to happen on a much larger scale than before. However, governments are also using AI for counter-terrorism. They use it to identify extremist content, detect online recruitment, and strengthen prevention programs. As technologies become more widely available, both terrorist groups and security agencies are likely to rely on them even more.¹⁰⁰

Commercial drones are one of the clearest examples of how civilian technology has been adapted for terrorist purposes. A 2026 study by NATO's Centre of Excellence Defence Against Terrorism found that every day, store-bought drones are used by terrorist and insurgent groups for surveillance, smuggling, and direct attacks.¹⁰¹ The report explains that these systems are cheap, widely available, and difficult to trace. These characteristics make them attractive tools for terrorist organizations. This creates new security problems for the OSCE region, where long land borders and large rural areas can make detection and monitoring more difficult. Unlike traditional smuggling methods, drones can cross borders without using official checkpoints. This increases the need for stronger regional cooperation and new surveillance strategies.

Encrypted messaging apps create a different challenge for investigators and prosecutors. Many organizations use end-to-end encryption. This is a way to lock data on a device so only

the person receiving it can unlock and read it.¹⁰² Technologies like this make it much harder to collect the digital evidence needed for criminal investigations. A European Commission-funded research project found that many police forces still lack the legal tools and technical skills needed to investigate encrypted platforms. It also recommends stronger international cooperation so that digital evidence collected in one country can be used in another.¹⁰³

These challenges connect to a bigger legal debate on cybercrime. Cybercrime is any illegal act that uses computers or technology. It can target computer systems or use technology to carry out crimes.¹⁰⁴ In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the first global treaty on cybercrime. However, the treaty does not specifically address cyberterrorism because countries could not agree on a common definition. Cyberterrorism is the use of computer network attacks by terrorist groups to cause disruption, harm, or fear against a society or government.¹⁰⁵ As a result, there is still no universal legal framework for prosecuting cyberterrorist attacks. States must rely on their own national laws, which vary widely across jurisdictions.¹⁰⁶

Many governments are still adapting their laws to address new technologies used for terrorist purposes. In February 2026, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNCCT) brought together lawmakers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and several other countries to discuss how their laws should respond to the misuse of AI. The workshop stressed that new laws should strengthen

There is still no universal legal framework for prosecuting cyberterrorist attacks.

security while protecting human rights. It also highlighted that outdated or inconsistent legal frameworks create gaps. Terrorist groups can use those gaps by operating across different countries with different laws. These challenges are not just limited to AI. They also include drones, encrypted communications, and other emerging technologies. This shows why countries must work together now more than ever to address these threats.¹⁰⁷

Recent data show how quickly the terrorist threat is evolving. The 2026 Global Terrorism Index found that terrorist groups are making a broader shift in the global threat landscape.¹⁰⁸ The report also found that lone-actor attacks are rising globally. A lone-actor attack is one carried out by a single person, not an organized group. This shift can be linked to the rise of attacks where the person's belief or reasons are unclear. This reflects a larger problem of how political and social uncertainty leads to radicalization. According to the Index, online extremist content has helped make the radicalization process faster. People can be exposed to extreme ideas through social media and other online platforms. Due to the social media algorithm, what may begin as a casual interest can develop into stronger beliefs quickly. Because of this, a person may move from simply viewing content to taking direct and sometimes violent action faster than before. This helps explain why current terrorist threats are becoming harder to predict. Instead of large organized groups planning attacks over long periods, threats are now coming from individuals who become radicalized online and act alone. Together, these changes point to a threat that is smaller, less coordinated, and increasingly supported by technologies that were originally developed for civilian use.¹⁰⁹

Deepfakes are another technology that is used by terrorists. Deepfake is an AI-generated audio, video, or image designed to appear authentic. Recent research shows that terrorist and violent extremist groups are using AI-generated content more often. In 2023, the terrorist group ISIL began testing generative AI to improve their

online activities. They experimented with AI-made media such as news-style graphics and translated them into different languages. This allowed them to produce and share content online more quickly and across a broader audience.¹¹⁰ Another example includes neo-Nazi groups who have used AI voice-cloning tools to produce English-language versions of Adolf Hitler's speeches. These were spread and seen by millions of online users.¹¹¹ Deepfakes can weaken public trust by making it more difficult to distinguish real information from manipulated content. During terrorist attacks or other crises, this can complicate public communication and make false information more convincing and easier to spread.

For OSCE countries, these developments create a difficult policy challenge. AI, drones, encrypted communications, and other emerging technologies are all important to civilian societies. Yet, they have been used by terrorist groups to carry out crimes and cause harm. Encryption protects privacy and financial transactions, drones support agriculture and emergency response, and AI contributes to fields such as healthcare and education.¹¹² If regulations become too strict, they could limit new ideas, technology, as well as basic rights and freedoms. On the other hand, if regulations are too weak, they may leave gaps that violent extremist groups can take advantage of. This creates a need for governments and the OSCE to find a balance between security, innovation, and individual rights.¹¹³

BALANCING SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

No single country can track terrorist networks that operate across borders on its own. Countries have widely agreed that fighting terrorism requires cooperation and intelligence sharing. However, states often hesitate to share sensitive information. Intelligence may come from confidential sources, ongoing investigations, or information provided by local groups and

charities under strict conditions. Sharing information can make regions safer. However, it can also create concerns about protecting sources, national security, and respecting each country's sovereignty. Because of this, one of the biggest challenges for the OSCE is finding the right balance between international cooperation and the protection of sensitive national intelligence.¹¹⁴

This tension is reflected throughout the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy. Adopted in 2006, it is a living document aimed to improve regional and international counterterrorism efforts. Its status as a living document means it is reviewed and revised by the UN General Assembly every two years.¹¹⁵ The 2023 review of this strategy calls on member states to strengthen international cooperation, improve information sharing, and improve their ability to prevent terrorism. At the same time, it stresses that all counter-terrorism measures must comply with international laws. These include human rights law, humanitarian law, and refugee law. This is opposed to treating security and human rights as competing goals. Instead, it recognized that both are needed for effective counter-terrorism. This reflects one of the central challenges facing the OSCE. The OSCE must help countries work together, while also respecting their rights to make their own decisions. All while protecting the basic rights and freedoms promised under international law.¹¹⁶

The OSCE has tried to address this problem through Intelligence-Led Policing (ILP). Instead of responding only after crimes happen, ILP takes a more proactive approach. It encourages police forces to collect and analyze information about possible threats and criminal activity. They then use this information to decide where to focus their resources. The OSCE's Strategic Police Matters Unit promotes this idea across participating states. Their goal is to strengthen crime prevention and improve cross-border cooperation. The unit encourages police agencies to use ILP for analyzing and sharing information. This helps law enforcement agencies

better understand how intelligence has been collected, assessed, and classified.¹¹⁷ As a result, agencies can share and understand information more effectively, allowing them to identify and respond to potential terrorist threats.

The benefits of ILP can be seen in a recent study on Salafi-jihadist networks in Southeastern Europe. The study identified an important pattern in how these networks operate. Covering Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro, it was found that these networks often depend on key figures who organize travel, fake documents, and movement across borders. While these people may not be the leaders of the network, they are vital in helping it operate. The study suggests that stopping these networks requires more than targeting top leaders. It also needs to identify and monitor the individuals who enable movement and coordination. This shows how collecting and analyzing information can help law enforcement better understand how terrorists operate and identify potential threats.¹¹⁸

One approach to early counterterrorism efforts is Travel Intelligence (TRAVINT). TRAVINT uses information such as passenger name records, border-crossing data, and mobility patterns to identify connections between individuals and potential terrorist networks. However, TRAVINT only works with fast, solid cooperation between neighboring states. Information collected by one country can only do so much if the threat moves across a border. Other countries must be able to access and use that information quickly. Otherwise, a person may cross a border before authorities have time to respond. This is precisely why regional teamwork matters so much. For example, if Albania flags a suspicious traveler, the information must reach North Macedonia quickly. If they cannot receive and act on the warning, the person may cross the border before authorities can respond. In practice, this means TRAVINT is only as strong as the slowest or least reliable part of the regional system. This is why building fast, trusted, standard sharing channels between neighboring states matters just as much as collecting information in the first place.¹¹⁹

The use of ILP and TRAVINT raises potential human rights concerns. UNODC training materials for counter-terrorism practitioners emphasize that surveillance and intelligence-gathering tools can create serious privacy risks. Technologies like wiretaps, message interception, and large-scale data collection are among the most invasive measures available to states. Because of this, these tools require strong oversight from courts or independent groups. This helps ensure that surveillance is legal and truly needed, and not more invasive than necessary.¹²⁰ Without these safeguards, intelligence-sharing agreements could allow states to bypass their own laws. For example, countries could ask foreign allies to collect information that it would not be legally allowed to on its own. This has the potential to weaken privacy rights and other legal protections.¹²¹

This is where ODIHR, the OSCE's human rights institution, plays an important role. ODIHR ensures that counter-terrorism measures remain consistent with international human rights standards. Its work stresses that security measures need three things. Efforts must stay transparent, so people can understand how security measures are being used. Next,

accountability is required to hold governments responsible for their actions. Finally, strong safeguards to protect individuals and prevent the abuse of their rights.¹²² This kind of independent oversight is essential for intelligence cooperation. It helps ensure that expanded security powers are used lawfully and proportionately. For OSCE states, human rights monitoring provides an external check that improves trust while protecting individual rights.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the OSCE work within the same broader European security space. NATO identifies intelligence-sharing as an essential part of its approach to countering terrorism and new security threats as well. At the same time, NATO emphasizes that these efforts must stay consistent with international law. This includes human rights law and international humanitarian law. NATO pushes its members to share intel faster and more often. But it also insists that security steps stay bound by legal limits.¹²³ This is the same challenge faced by the OSCE and other international organizations. States must improve information-sharing while protecting fundamental rights and legal limits. No organization has eliminated this problem completely. Each has just



Passport control at an airport

Credit: Rakoon

built its own way to manage the balance between shared security and individual protection.

In the end, the challenge facing OSCE states is not whether intelligence-sharing is necessary. Nearly everyone agrees that it is. The real question is how can it be structured effectively. States increasingly recognize that terrorist networks cannot be addressed through national efforts alone. At the same time, cooperation depends on trust, legal safeguards, and accountability. Further, their strategies must protect sensitive information and individual rights. For OSCE, the key to answering these questions must be addressed and collectively agreed upon by its participating states, in order to create a comprehensive and effective solution.

Bloc Analysis

POINTS OF DIVISION

Although OSCE participating states broadly agree that terrorism remains a serious transnational threat, they do not always agree on how to respond to it. The disagreement is rarely about whether counter-terrorism is necessary. Instead, it centers on how these measures should be carried out. Different governments place different priorities on security, sovereignty, human rights, and government capacity. As a result, disagreements often emerge over intelligence-sharing, oversight of security agencies, and the best way to strengthen international counter-terrorism efforts.

One of the biggest debates concerns information-sharing. Many member states argue that terrorist networks move across borders too quickly for governments to rely only on a voluntary, case-by-case basis. They support stronger information-sharing systems, shared databases, and faster coordination between national authorities.¹²⁴ Other states are more cautious. They argue that intelligence often involves sensitive sources, ongoing

investigations, and national security concerns that cannot always be shared.¹²⁵

A second debate focuses on how counter-terrorism frameworks should be supervised. Some participating states believe national governments should oversee their own security agencies because they understand their legal systems and security needs best. Others argue that independent oversight, including human rights checks, is needed. This helps make sure that new powers are used fairly and legally.¹²⁶ This divide matters because many of the tools discussed in this committee can have both benefits and risks. Biometric data, access to encrypted evidence, and systems for classifying prisoners can improve security and prevent threats. However, if they are not used carefully, they can create risks for individuals' rights and privacy.¹²⁷

Another important discussion centers on implementation. Some states believe the priority should be creating stronger laws, shared standards, and clearer international goals. Others argue that many governments already support these goals, but lack the training, funding, and technology needed to put them into practice.¹²⁸ For these states, providing these resources is just as important as creating new legislation.

These three points shape the main policy divisions within this committee. A state's position will depend on its security priorities, legislation, and institutional needs. As a result, the blocs below represent different policy approaches rather than permanent alliances. Many states may agree with one bloc on certain issues and another bloc on different questions. This creates space for discussion and compromise.

STRENGTHENED ENFORCEMENT AND INTELLIGENCE SHARING

This bloc combats transnational terrorism in three main ways. These include improving cooperation between countries, faster information sharing, and giving law enforcement

more power and resources. These states understand that terrorist networks adapt quickly. They often move across borders faster than governments can respond. Because of this, they believe that security institutions need more consistent systems for information-sharing, border screening, and digital investigation. Countries such as France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and Spain often stress the importance of fast cooperation and information sharing. This is partly because these countries have experienced terrorist attacks connected to international terrorist networks and foreign terrorist fighters.

These states are likely to support stronger cooperation through organizations such as the OSCE's Transnational Threats Department (TNTD). They support faster sharing of travel information, identity data, and intelligence between national agencies. They argue that delays can create security gaps. For this bloc, voluntary cooperation is not always fast enough when terrorist threats move across borders in real time. Türkiye, for example, has frequently pushed stronger border controls and information sharing. This is due to their location near conflict zones and its own past managing foreign fighter movements.¹²⁹

Regarding FTFs, this bloc generally supports strong legal accountability and prosecution when evidence allows it. However, many of these states also recognize that rehabilitation programs can reduce long-term security risks when used together with legal measures. On emerging technologies, these states are more open to using digital evidence, biometric systems, and intelligence tools when used legally. They believe these tools can help prevent attacks and improve investigations. Countries like France and the United Kingdom have often supported stronger counter-terrorism powers. At the same time, they have kept laws and rules to control how these powers are used.¹³⁰ For this bloc, the main priority is simple. Ensure that governments have all the tools needed to respond quickly before threats become attacks.

Supporters of this approach argue that these tools are necessary to stop attacks before they happen. However, increasing surveillance, sharing more personal data, and increasing government access to digital communications can also raise concerns about privacy and governments use. Some states worry that these powers could affect fundamental rights if they are not carefully supervised. This debate over security and privacy explains why other states favor stronger legal safeguards.

RIGHTS-BASED SECURITY AND INDEPENDENT OVERSIGHT

This bloc agrees that international cooperation against terrorism is necessary. But it argues that security measures must be built around strong legal safeguards. These states believe that long-term security depends on more than just preventing attacks. It also depends on keeping public trust and the rule of law. Countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, and the Netherlands often stress the importance of judicial review, privacy protections, and independent oversight when creating new counter-terrorism policies. They believe new security measures should be carefully checked to ensure they follow the law and protect people's rights.

These states are likely to support stronger human rights standards within intelligence-sharing systems. They argue that cooperation needs clear limits on how information gets collected, stored and used. They often point to the work of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). Rather than treating checks as obstacles, this bloc argues that accountability makes security cooperation stronger over time.¹³¹ They believe that when governments are open about their actions, people are more likely to trust them. This trust makes it easier for governments and citizens to work together on security issues, ensuring the protection of their basic rights. Germany is an important example of this strategy. Germany has a Counter-Terrorism Database

that allows police and intelligence agencies to share information to identify possible terrorist threats. However, Germany's Constitutional Court has also placed strict limitations on how this information is collected, shared, and used. Therefore, showcasing how a government can provide security agencies the tools they need while still creating rules to protect individual privacy and freedom.¹³²

On foreign terrorist fighters, this bloc generally supports prosecution when evidence allows it. But it places greater emphasis on checking each case on its own, rehabilitation, and reintegration. These states argue that treating all returnees as identical threats can create additional risks. This hits harder, especially for children and family members affected by conflict.¹³³ When it comes to emerging technologies, this bloc is more cautious about expanding surveillance tools, biometric databases, and access to encrypted communications. They argue that tools such as AI and digital monitoring should include safeguards from the beginning. Security tools without proper oversight can weaken laws and legal systems they are meant to protect.¹³⁴

Unlike the first bloc, these states do not believe that stronger security powers always lead to better security. They argue that broad surveillance or access to personal data without strong safeguards can reduce public trust. Over time, this could make it harder for countries to work together on security issues. For this bloc, counterterrorism measures are most effective when they protect both national and fundamental rights.

CAPACITY-BUILDING AND IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

This bloc focuses less on creating new rules and more on helping countries follow the rules they already have. These states argue that one of the biggest challenges in counter-terrorism cooperation is not a lack of political agreement. Instead, countries have different levels of

resources, skills, and systems. They emphasize that intelligence-sharing, border security, digital investigations, and rehabilitation programs only work when governments have the right resources. These include trained personnel, reliable systems, and the technology needed to apply them. Countries such as Uzbekistan, Albania, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Georgia often highlight the importance of international assistance. This is because they face complex security challenges that require stronger institutional support from other countries.

These states are likely to support expanding OSCE programs, technical training, and partnerships with organizations such as the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT). Instead of focusing only on creating new international standards, they argue that existing rules also need to come with practical support. For example, Uzbekistan's return programs and participation in regional rehabilitation efforts show this approach in action. Since 2019, Uzbekistan has carried out several repatriation operations, known as Operation Mehr. The goal of these operations was to bring FTFs home from Syria and Iraq. Not only did they focus on bringing people home, but they also worked to help returnees rebuild their lives. Uzbekistan provided programs for family support, education, mental health care, and social services.¹³⁵ This is one example of how countries can combine security measures with long-term reintegration strategies.¹³⁶

Regarding FTFs, this bloc supports plans that help governments manage returnees safely through prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration programs. They argue that countries cannot be expected to follow tricky frameworks without the staff and structures needed to carry them out.¹³⁷ On new technologies, these states are generally open to using digital tools, but they emphasize that technology alone cannot solve security problems. Without training, legal frameworks, and technical support, new tools may create new risks instead of improving security. For this bloc, the main goal

is to make sure that international cooperation produces results not only on paper, but also in practice.

Committee Mission

Counter-terrorism became a formal concern of the OSCE only after the September 11 attacks. Following the attacks, member states adopted the 2001 Bucharest Plan of Action for Combating Terrorism. This was the OSCE's first dedicated counter-terrorism framework.¹³⁸ That early framework later grew into the layered system this committee works within today. It is coordinated through the Transnational Threats Department and guided by the 2012 Consolidated Framework for the Fight Against Terrorism.

This committee's main objective comes straight from that setup. The Transnational Threats Department (TNTD) is the OSCE's main hub for counter-terrorism work.

TNTD leads the OSCE's work on terror threats, border safety, police work, and cyber risks. It does not replace state agencies or force all states to use the same laws.¹³⁹ In short, the committee's goal is not to make one top-down rule that binds every state the same way. It shares good practices, gives advice, and offers training and support. Its work links security with economic needs and human rights. Each state still controls its own laws and security agencies. In this way, the OSCE helps its 57 participating states build strong systems and respond to threats that cross borders.¹⁴⁰

Within this goal, the OSCE can use all the tools already active in their counter-terrorism framework. These tools include using international counter-terrorism law and stopping violent extremism. They also include removing terrorists from the internet, cutting off their funding, and guarding key infrastructure.¹⁴¹ The OSCE runs on consensus. This means that every action plan must work for all states. Resolutions must account for different threats and opposing

goals between member states. Finding common ground is essential to creating solutions that all states can put into practice.

More than 50 years after its creation, the OSCE still runs on the same core idea it started with. Security within Europe cannot be separated from human rights, economic stability, and open dialogue. This remains true even when states have fundamental disagreements or deep distrust between one another.¹⁴² This idea is what makes the OSCE's work on terrorism so difficult, but it is necessary for its present and future.

TOPIC B

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Environmental Rehabilitation in Ukraine



Photo Credit: State Emergency Service of Ukraine

Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been ongoing for centuries. Since Russia's large-scale attack in 2022, conditions in Ukraine have significantly worsened. Thousands of lives have been lost, infrastructure has been destroyed, and the country is facing critical humanitarian and economic crises.¹⁴³ The war in Ukraine has also led to one of the most severe environmental crises to date. In 2022 alone, there were 5,000 reported incidents of environmental damage caused by the war.¹⁴⁴ This damage impacts multiple ecosystems in Ukraine. The Carpathian Mountains, a notable ecosystem in Ukraine, are facing deforestation and the destruction of their wildlife. Species that were once thriving are decreasing in numbers.¹⁴⁵ In the Black Sea and in coastal communities, underwater plants are dying due to pollution from oil spills, chemicals, and military occupation. Marine animal populations are shrinking as the water becomes too toxic to inhabit. Bodies of freshwater across the country face a similar fate.¹⁴⁶ Additionally, agricultural production is unstable due to the toxicity of soil from landmines, and the inability to source clean water for irrigation.¹⁴⁷ Overall, Ukraine is in environmental turmoil with every aspect of their environment and ecosystems being impacted due to the conflict.

Environmental rehabilitation is becoming a bigger priority for Ukraine as land and infrastructure continue to be destroyed.¹⁴⁸ Environmental rehabilitation is the process of cleaning up polluted land and water, restoring damaged ecosystems, and making contaminated areas safe for people and wildlife again.¹⁴⁹ However, these rehabilitation efforts face many challenges, such as hazardous materials, socio-economic limitations for rehabilitation projects, and gaps in government support and funding.¹⁵⁰

This environmental degradation resulting from this war is not only affecting Ukraine, but also other countries in the surrounding area and through shared trade routes. A decline in animal populations means less cross-region reproduction with animals from other countries.¹⁵¹ The pollution of the Black Sea affects other countries that lie on its coast.¹⁵² Countries that rely on Ukraine for their agricultural exports are now facing food instability as well.¹⁵³ The issues Ukraine's environment is facing are having effects that impact countries around the world.

Solving this crisis comes with many barriers.

The conflict in Ukraine is still ongoing, which makes the problems harder to solve as damage continues to happen. Another large factor is how to fund all the rehabilitation efforts. Many countries that are part of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) are trying to help fund environmental initiatives to help Ukraine begin its recovery. However, funds and resources are also needed for other urgent matters in the conflict, such as medicine and basic necessities like water and food. Complete environmental rehabilitation is projected to cost hundreds of billions of dollars. This means that to facilitate large-scale rehabilitation projects, more funding, resources, and better coordination are necessary. Hence, it is essential for states and international partners to work together to create a plan for Ukraine's environment, both now and for the future.¹⁵⁴

History and Description of the Issue

HISTORY OF CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

From the 14th to the 18th century, portions of Ukraine were ruled and occupied by different countries. These included Lithuania, Poland, and Russia. Most of Ukraine fell fully to Russian rule in the 18th century. After World War I, a majority of the Ukrainian region became a republic of the Soviet Union, with parts of western Ukraine being divided between Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. From 1932 to 1933, the Ukrainian people faced a severe man-made famine created by the Soviet ruler Joseph Stalin, also known as the Holodomor.¹⁵⁵ The Holodomor killed at least 5 million people across the USSR between 1931 and 1934. Along with the famine, Ukrainians and their identity were targeted by the Soviet secret police. They targeted Ukrainian political establishments and religious leaders. As a result, many Ukrainians felt abused and betrayed by their new government. As a result, ideas about revolution and independence began to spread.¹⁵⁶

The Ukrainian People's Republic was a socialist non-Bolshevik group that focused on the importance of Ukrainian independence from 1917 to 1920.¹⁵⁷ The Bolsheviks were a radical political group led by Vladimir Lenin. The Ukrainian People's Republic directly opposed them. This group believed that independence was a right to the Ukrainian people.¹⁵⁸ The belief that Ukraine deserved independence led to tensions between Russia and Ukraine early on. Although many people living in Ukraine shared cultural, linguistic, or historical ties with Russia, support for an independent Ukrainian state continued to grow throughout the 20th century.¹⁵⁹ Ukraine ultimately declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine wanted independence in hopes of escaping economic collapse and political control from Moscow as the Soviet Union was falling apart.¹⁶⁰

In 1954, the Soviet government decided to transfer the territory of Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federation of Socialist Republics to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.¹⁶¹ Crimea is a peninsula on the northern coast of the Black Sea in Eastern Europe. They did this to strengthen ties between Russian and Ukrainian individuals and resolve tensions.¹⁶² In the 1980s, a strong movement for Ukrainian independence began. This became an important political move in the 1990s when the Soviet Union began implementing legislative elections. In the referendum that occurred in December 1991, Ukraine's path to independence was heavily supported. This referendum was a direct vote by the Ukrainian people on whether Ukraine should gain its independence or not. Majorities in almost every region, including Crimea, voted for independence. The territory of Crimea is heavily contested as it is internationally recognized as part of Ukraine, but has technically been under Russian control since 2014.¹⁶³ This vote for independence was slightly shocking because at the time, Ukraine was in a state of economic crisis. A large part of the population believed it would be beneficial to remain close to Russia because Russia could help improve the economy. However, Ukrainian elites wanted an independent state and hoped that independence would bring better living standards.¹⁶⁴ Despite the disagreements within the country, in 1991 Ukraine gained its independence through the referendum vote and became its own state. From then until 2014, Ukraine transitioned to an independent state by navigating political, economic, and constitutional reforms, strengthening its national identity while trying to balance relationships with both Russia and Europe.¹⁶⁵

However, in 2014, Russia began its first invasion of Ukraine by turning Crimea into a battle ground. Russia took control of Crimea and began supporting armed groups in eastern Ukraine. The United States and European Union (EU) were outraged by this annexation. As a result, the US and EU imposed strict economic sanctions against Russia in response.¹⁶⁶ This did not stop

Russia. The fighting over Crimea and eastern Ukraine led to the death of over 14,000 people. In addition to the loss of life, the conflict also damaged forests, agricultural land, freshwater, and protected natural areas. This shows that the effects of war on people and the environment are often connected. This conflict was the first time since World War II that a country took control of another country's territory.¹⁶⁷

Most recently, in February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin opposed the Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's pro-Western policies, especially his stated desire to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Beyond this, Russia has many other interests in Ukraine. There are about 8 million Russian natives living in Ukraine. Putin believed he had to protect Russian native speakers in Ukraine from this Western influence.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, Russia relied on Ukraine for power and trade, making their separation in 1991 harmful to Russia.¹⁶⁹

The Russo-Ukrainian conflict has led to many environmental impacts and casualties. Although Russia has not made many gains in the war against Ukraine since 2022, they have caused an estimated death count of 1.2 million. Russian forces have only gained about 1.5 percent of Ukraine's territory since 2024. In Ukraine, thousands of soldiers and civilians have been injured or killed. In addition to the cost of lives, military operations have severely damaged homes, infrastructure, farmland, forests, and freshwater resources. These environmental impacts have also disrupted access to clean water, reduced agricultural production, and caused significant damage to nearby communities.¹⁷⁰

Russia and Ukraine remain stuck in this conflict. Many individuals believe that the conflict has moved beyond gaining territory. Oxana Sehevel, a professor of comparative politics, believes, "It is really about Ukrainians not having the right to exist as a distinct and separate nation and state."¹⁷¹ Russian leadership has

repeatedly questioned Ukraine's legitimacy as an independent state. This argument has led to concerns that this conflict is much larger and more complicated than a territorial dispute. This is because both sides clearly have different views on Ukraine's sovereignty and national identity.¹⁷²

Despite the large toll this war is taking on both countries, the Kremlin continues to reject offers for peace talks from President Zelensky. The Kremlin is a fortified complex in the center of Moscow that serves as the home of the President of the Russian Federation and the headquarters of the government.¹⁷³ Putin has stated that peace talks are useless until Ukraine withdraws from territories claimed by Russia and stops working with NATO.¹⁷⁴ This raises concerns that peace and ceasefire discussions alone will not resolve the war.

As the conflict continues to evolve, environmental degradation remains inseparable from humanitarian and economic challenges. Ukraine is struggling with decreases in public health, food insecurity, contamination to clean water, and costly economic and environmental recovery. Therefore, environmental rehabilitation has become an essential component to Ukraine's reconstruction efforts and an increasingly important area for international cooperation.¹⁷⁵

POLLUTION DUE TO HAZARDOUS WASTE CONTAMINATION

Ukraine's land has been contaminated and attacked by military weapons. As a result, soils now contain heavy metals, industrial facilities have been destroyed, and safe drinking water has been contaminated. When a country's environment is intentionally and widely damaged by another, causing greater harm to its people, this is known as ecocide. Although ecocide is not yet formally recognized as an international crime under international law, Ukraine has used the term to describe the environmental consequences of the war.¹⁷⁶ Ukraine is currently experiencing widespread environmental

degradation as the ongoing war has harmed its ecosystems and polluted its land. One major form of pollution today is pollution caused by exposure to hazardous waste. Air, water, soil, and entire ecosystems in Ukraine are at risk due to exposure to hazardous materials. Many Russian attacks have targeted important infrastructure like power plants, oil refineries, and chemical warehouses. These attacks release toxic waste, acidic materials, and contaminated water into local ecosystems.¹⁷⁷ These pollutants not only threaten biodiversity but also increase health risks for civilians and complicate long-term recovery efforts.¹⁷⁸

Over 15 million tonnes of debris, which contain hazardous materials and require specialized disposal, have been released from the attacks.¹⁷⁹ Managing the debris and its disposal becomes difficult due to the toxicity of the materials. Destruction of old buildings leads to asbestos, heavy metals, and other chemical compounds being released into the air.¹⁸⁰ Asbestos is a material made up of microscopic threads that was commonly used in construction. Breathing in asbestos can cause damage to cells. Exposure to these chemicals over long periods of time can increase the risk of diseases, such as lung

cancer. The release of asbestos and heavy metal materials into the air has devastating consequences. Poor air quality can increase respiratory illnesses among the public and surrounding communities. This places additional strain on Ukraine's struggling infrastructure and healthcare in this time of conflict. As these contaminants settle into the soil and water, they also begin to threaten agricultural production and drinking water supplies.¹⁸¹

Another form of hazardous air pollution comes from the explosions of agricultural facilities. Attacks on these facilities have led to the release of toxic compounds into the air such as fertilizers and nitric acid.¹⁸² Water quality and infrastructure have also faced significant destruction. The destruction of some facilities has led to the release of solvents, ammonia, and microplastics into the water and the ground.¹⁸³ These are all pollutants that can cause reproductive issues, cancer, and heart attacks.¹⁸⁴ In a recent study of some of Ukraine's rivers, a report stated that the concentration of ammonia and nitrates was at 165, which is about 50 times higher than the suggested limit. This is highly concerning because about 25 percent of Ukraine relies on groundwater for all of their water supply

An unexploded warhead from a Russian missile, found in Vinnytsia Ukraine

Credit: State Emergency Service of Ukraine



needs. Therefore, groundwater contamination threatens both ecosystems and human health.¹⁸⁵ The contamination of groundwater is especially dangerous since the pollutants can spread beyond where the contamination began. Because of this, it could take years to remove the pollutants from these water sources.

The soil in Ukraine is also extremely toxic. About one-third of Ukraine's soil is now contaminated. Millions of hectares of land have been affected by explosives, heavy metals, fuel spills, and other hazardous substances.¹⁸⁶ Sampling surveys have found toxic pollutants such as lead, arsenic, and mercury within soil. These metals can cause long term health effects like heart disease, kidney failure, and cause reproductive issues.¹⁸⁷ Food harvested from toxic soil can also cause cancer and greatly impact human health overall. Before the war broke out in Ukraine, about 400 million people relied on Ukraine for their food supply. This made the issue of soil and agricultural contamination an international issue.¹⁸⁸ Currently, contaminated farmlands require a lot of rehabilitation before they can safely be used again. The damaged soil in these areas also threatens farmers' livelihoods, food production, and the economic stability of rural communities that depend heavily on farming.

Not only is Ukraine being polluted with hazardous materials, but it is also home to many nuclear plants whose destruction could result in radioactive contamination. Ukraine currently has four operational nuclear power plants with 15 reactors, used to generate energy. They also have research reactors and nuclear waste disposal sites.¹⁸⁹ The bombings from

the war pose a large concern for potential contamination and pollutants, if these nuclear sites are damaged. Organizations remain on watch and report updates constantly to monitor the situation. A nuclear incident resulting from the war could have effects that extend far beyond Ukraine's borders. Radioactive materials can spread through the atmosphere and contaminate water, soil, and agriculture systems in neighboring countries. Such contamination would threaten both ecosystems and public health. Radiation exposure can alter and damage cells and DNA in living things, causing cancer or reproductive infertility.¹⁹⁰

Ukraine also stores large amounts of rocket fuel materials throughout the country which is both hazardous and highly flammable. The containers holding the rocket fuel materials are slowly breaking down since rocket fuel is an extremely toxic material.¹⁹¹ This makes safe disposal of these materials an urgent issue. Since 2002, the OSCE has been attempting to implement projects to dispose of these hazardous and toxic chemicals. In the past, OSCE has already helped dispose of 16,000 tonnes of toxic waste from Ukraine. This gives OSCE experience in managing and removing dangerous waste in the country.¹⁹² The war has increased the concern and urgency around handling and removing these dangerous materials. Nonetheless, continued international cooperation will be necessary to safely remove all toxic contaminants.

Millions of hectares of land have been affected by explosives, heavy metals, fuel spills, and other hazardous substances.

THREATS TO BIODIVERSITY OF FLORA AND FAUNA

Ukraine has over 70,000 species of plants and animals, making it a very biodiverse region. Although Ukraine only accounts for about 6 percent of Europe's land area, it is home to 35 percent of all European biodiversity. Thus, Ukraine is one of Europe's most ecologically important countries. Ukraine includes about 11 percent of the Carpathian Mountains, which are full of dense forests and alpine meadows. Forests account for about 15.9 percent of Ukraine's territory, and about one-fourth of all Ukrainian plant species are found in these forests. The country also has 63,000 rivers, and a portion of Ukrainian territory is located on the Black Sea. These features provide a variety of habitats, such as grasslands, marine wetlands, and coastal environments throughout the country.¹⁹³ Additionally, UNESCO has identified eight biosphere reserves in Ukraine, and there are 50 Wetlands of International Importance. These are known as "living laboratories" where conservation and scientific research are integrated to show how humans and the ecosystems can work together.¹⁹⁴ These ecosystems can support human populations by providing clean water, flood regulation, fertile soils, and economic opportunities through agriculture or tourism.¹⁹⁵ However, the plants and animals of this biodiverse country are at risk with the large-scale conflict that has been and is currently occurring.

The dense forests in the Carpathian Mountains are home to many unique species that are being harmed from military activity. For example, the Eurasian brown bear. In Europe, there are over 200,000 of these bears, but in Ukraine, there are only 150 to 250 bears left. The bears live in the Carpathian Mountains where the dense forests provide paths to guide migration patterns for these bears. The conflict in Ukraine has posed large threats through habitat fragmentation and forest degradation. Whether through combat, explosives, or Russian occupation, the disruption of these habitats has threatened this species

and significantly disrupted its migration patterns. Specifically, the forest and part of the Carpathian Mountains that connects Ukraine to Romania are at risk.¹⁹⁶ Romania has a much larger and more stable population of these Eurasian brown bears. The forests between Ukraine and Romania are a crucial connection point for the Eurasian brown bears of Ukraine to interact with the Romanian population. This benefits gene flow, which is the transfer of genetics from one population to another, and helps the Ukrainian bear population grow since the connection with other bears encourages reproduction.¹⁹⁷ Bombings and drone strikes of Carpathian forests have not only caused direct environmental damage but have also led to fires.¹⁹⁸ The damage of these critical habitats will have long-term consequences that can threaten the existence of certain species in Ukraine, like the Eurasian brown bear.

Similar to the Eurasian brown bear, species like the European bison are at risk. The European bison is the largest land animal in Europe. It has about seven populations currently spread throughout Ukraine. The case of the European bison brings another issue to light. Direct conflict and destruction of their habitat are significant threats. However, the war has also interfered with authorities within Ukraine who used to watch over the bison populations. "Poaching" refers to the illegal hunting and capturing of plants and animals. Since the beginning of the war, poaching has become more difficult to monitor or stop. With Ukraine's infrastructure struggling, management of protected parks and species has significantly decreased as attention goes elsewhere. Without proper funding or management, these bison populations face additional challenges from exposure to diseases and lack of veterinary care, habitat fragmentation, and limited wildlife management and resources. The war is not only impacting the environment, but also the people and systems that were put in place to help protect and manage the environment. As this war continues, the future of these ecosystems and wildlife populations will continue to be under threat.



A forest fire in Kharkiv, Ukraine, caused by military shelling

Credit: State Emergency Service of Ukraine

The economic, social, and cultural services that these ecosystems provide to surrounding human communities, such as ecotourism and agricultural production, will also be impacted as a result of habitat loss and declining wildlife populations.¹⁹⁹

Freshwater ecosystems have also been badly impacted by the war. One of the most catastrophic impacts so far was the destruction of the Kakhovka dam. The dam was destroyed by an internal explosive. This caused downstream flooding and widespread environmental damage that polluted multiple freshwater and marine ecosystems in its path. The flood caused high concentrations of pollutants to spread throughout the Black Sea. This significantly reduced the water salt levels, which harmed and killed thousands of sea animals that can only live in salt water. Additionally, the flow of water was so strong that it washed out large amounts of reed belts whose debris was scattered for 250 kilometers on the coastline.²⁰⁰ Reed-belt vegetation, dense patches of wetland grass, is critical to these marine ecosystems as it creates a natural water filtration system. These natural filtration systems are essential for both animal and human communities for food and water. They

are also a hotspot for biodiversity, as the tall reeds provide a safe spot for animals to hide or lay eggs.²⁰¹

With the destruction of the dam, the bottom of the large reservoir was exposed. The bottom of that reservoir contained large amounts of lead, cadmium, and other heavy metals.²⁰² These metals can cause long-lasting health effects like increased risk of heart disease and kidney failure.²⁰³ Seasonal rain, run-off, and flooding, picked up these heavy metals and spread them through marine ecosystems, damaging water quality and harming animals.²⁰⁴ The dam's destruction equally impacted human communities, causing mass displacement, destroyed homes, and lost belongings. This demonstrates how damage to ecosystems can directly threaten human welfare as well.²⁰⁵

Conflict in the Black Sea has led to decreased fish quantity, destruction of marine infrastructure, and the loss of marine mammal populations. Fires caused by weapons or explosions in coastal shrubs and forests have destroyed the local vegetation. The construction of trenches and military bases on the coast has damaged

large amounts of plants by eroding and polluting the soil. Unexploded mines have been reported throughout the coast since they have been planted to prevent attacks from the water. These mines pose a risk to wildlife if they explode. Also, these unexploded mines release heavy metal pollutants and restrict access to fishing grounds and coastal waters that support local economies. The heavy pollutants have killed off several species of algae in the water, which are a crucial and foundational species for any marine ecosystem. For example, as algae populations die, any fish species that depended on them for food will also die. This will affect the entire ecosystem, the biodiversity in the region, and human commercial fisheries that also rely on these food chains.²⁰⁶

Moreover, military ships operating in the Black Sea have caused multiple marine mammals, like the harbor porpoises, to be removed or lost from their habitats. The underwater sonar systems, a technology that creates noise to help ships navigate, interfere with the porpoises' echolocation. The echolocation system in porpoises is a natural body process that allows them to navigate through water and find food. As military ships continue to surround the Black Sea, this leads to many marine mammals getting lost due to confusion.²⁰⁷ Because healthy ecosystems provide food, clean water, flood protection, and economic opportunities, protecting Ukraine's environmental health and biodiversity also has a direct and long-term impact on their human populations. All ecosystems in Ukraine are impacted by this large conflict, from land to sea.

AGRICULTURAL AND FOOD SECURITY IMPACTS

Ukraine has been known as the “breadbasket of Europe” for many years due to its highly fertile soil and the large amount of crops it exports each year.²⁰⁸ Before the war began, Ukraine exported about 46 percent of sunflower oil in the global food market. The country also exported 9 percent of wheat, 17 percent of barley, and 12 percent of corn.²⁰⁹ For most of the 20th century, Ukraine was a large importer of grain, and the shift to being a large-scale exporter did not occur until the 1990s.²¹⁰ However, in the ongoing war, exports have declined by about 35 percent. This drop in exports affects the global food market as well as Ukraine's local food security and economy. Agricultural production is slowing, and crops are becoming harder to produce. This decline in exports has consequences beyond Ukraine's border. Many countries in North Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia rely heavily on Ukrainian grain imports to meet basic food demand. As exports from Ukraine decrease, food prices increase and supply chains become less stable. This places additional pressures on countries that may already be facing food insecurity. As a result, agricultural challenges faced in Ukraine have become an international issue.²¹¹

Russia is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of fertilizers. The war has disrupted fertilizer markets through sanctions, trade restrictions, and supply chain interruptions. With the ongoing war, Ukraine is unable to get fertilizer exports directly from Russia. This

Before the war began, Ukraine exported about 46 percent of sunflower oil in the global food market. The country also exported 9 percent of wheat, 17 percent of barley, and 12 percent of corn.

difficulty to obtain fertilizer is making it harder for Ukraine to manage their agriculture. According to a study done by the UK and Netherlands, there is too much nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium being taken out of the ground through harvesting crops, and not enough being put back into the soil with fertilizers. This means that crops are taking the soil's nutrients, and the farmers who are working the land cannot restore these nutrients due to limited resources. This is lowering food production as more land becomes less suitable for planting crops.²¹²

Animal manure is occasionally used as a substitute for fertilizers, as it is more efficient and cheaper. However, recently, agricultural farmers in Ukraine have not kept as many animals as they once did. Hence, accessing animal manure for fertilizer has also become harder. Finding ways to manage soil health has proved difficult and is affecting crop yields, exports, and food security. In addition to nutrient depletion, military activity has directly damaged the soil quality in many regions. Explosions from artillery, missiles, and landmines change soil composition and introduce heavy metals and other contaminants into the land. These pollutants can stay in the ground for several years which makes agricultural

recovery a long-term challenge even after the conflict and fighting ends. The rehabilitation of the contaminated farmland requires assessment and long-term investment in soil restoration programs.²¹³

Another major concern from contaminated soils is reduced biodiversity, as pollutants and explosions can impact the thousands of organisms that live under the surface. These organisms are called decomposers, who play an important role of recycling nutrients for other organisms to use to survive. With the loss of decomposers and biodiversity, soil quality will further decline, causing farmers to keep seeing decreased crop yields, reduced income, and increased costs while trying to restore the land.²¹⁴ Environmental degradation not only affects animals but also rural communities and livelihoods.

The widespread presence of landmines and unexploded materials poses a high security risk. Ukraine is currently considered one of the most landmine-contaminated countries in the world. Studies have found that thousands of hectares in Ukraine are polluted and covered by unexploded land mines. Another one million hectares of land in Ukraine are suspected of being contaminated,



A wheat field in Rovno Ukraine

Credit: Liliia Moroz

and require surveying and clearance before they can be safely used for farming or other activities. This threatens the safety of farmers cultivating land and limits the amount of land available for agricultural production. The presence of land mines can further disrupt populations, by preventing displaced families from being able to return home and delaying environmental restoration efforts.²¹⁵

Agricultural production is also disrupted by the destruction of irrigation systems through the country. As mentioned earlier, in 2023, the Kakhovka Dam was destroyed. This reservoir was responsible for providing water to one of the largest irrigation systems in Ukraine. Its destruction left about 600,000 hectares of land without access to water. The loss of this irrigation infrastructure is particularly concerning in the southern regions of Ukraine, which depend the most heavily on irrigation systems to maintain their productivity. Without these reliable water sources, farmers had to reduce their harvests to accommodate the limited water supply. These also had to switch to crops that use less water. Droughts and shifting climate patterns may further worsen the challenges of watering crops. Beyond agricultural impacts, the loss of irrigation has also impacted rural communities by disrupting methods of income, like fishing, and their public health, by impacting clean drinking water and sanitation.²¹⁶

The physical occupation of land by Russian forces has also contributed to reduced agricultural output. According to a study done by NASA Harvest, the land that Russia is occupying in Ukraine used to produce 40

percent of all Ukraine's agricultural production. Russian occupation is limiting the amount of land available for crop cultivation.²¹⁷ The FAO put out a statement of concern on the food security situation in Ukraine that highlighted the agricultural insecurity and displacement that has resulted from the war.²¹⁸ Displacement has also reduced the available agricultural workforce as many farmers have been forced to flee their homes, join the military, or relocate to safer regions. Whether it is due to military mobilization, migration, or general population decline in rural areas due to attacks, the labor force is shrinking.²¹⁹ This is yet another reason for a decrease in agricultural and food security in Ukraine.

Beyond direct damage to farmland, the war has also disrupted Ukraine's ability to transport agricultural products to international markets. Before the full-scale invasion in 2022, a large portion of Ukrainian grain exports moved through Black Sea ports, such as Odessa. The blockade of these ports during the early stages of the war significantly reduced exports and left millions of tons of grain in storage facilities.²²⁰ Although some exports were able to go through other routes or were allowed to pass, transportation costs still increased. Railroads and road networks became critical for moving agricultural products, but these methods were less efficient and could not fully replace large shipping methods. Higher transportation costs reduce farmers' profits while increasing food prices for regions both in and outside of Ukraine. This shows how disruptions to Ukraine's environment and infrastructure caused global humanitarian consequences.²²¹

The land that Russia is occupying in Ukraine used to produce 40 percent of all Ukraine's agricultural production.

Agricultural infrastructure has suffered extensive damage throughout the conflict. Grain storage, warehouses, processing facilities, and agricultural machinery have been destroyed by military operations. According to assessments conducted by different international non-government organizations (NGOs), billions of dollars in agricultural assets have been lost since the start of the war. The destruction of storage facilities has created additional challenges for farmers because harvested crops cannot always be directly sold. Damage to equipment like tractors, harvesters, and irrigation systems, further reduces agricultural productivity and increases food insecurity. The destruction of agricultural infrastructure also increases the amount of construction debris, fuel spills, and hazardous waste that must be cleaned up before farming activities can fully resume. Similar to how the health of an environment impacts communities and economies, environmental rehabilitation also impacts economic recovery.²²²

From soil degradation, limited fertilizer resources, unexploded mines, land occupation, loss of agricultural workers, and widespread environmental contamination, Ukraine's agricultural infrastructure is being severely damaged and interrupted. For several years, this has been slowly breaking down Ukraine's farming industry. The environmental impacts of the conflict go far beyond damaged farmlands, affected water supplies, biodiversity, rural livelihoods, and global food supply chains. As conflict continues, all of these impacts will not only shape the current agricultural production, but many other issues as well, such as human welfare or public health. This poses significant challenges for Ukraine's long-term recovery, including environmental rehabilitation, economic recovery, and food systems.

Current Status

CHALLENGES TO ENVIRONMENTAL REHABILITATION WITH ONGOING CONFLICT

One of the largest challenges for Ukraine currently is that experts cannot safely access most of the damaged land to restore it. Some locations remain actively occupied by Russian forces, while other areas are too close to active frontlines. Even areas of land that are no longer experiencing direct conflict might still contain landmines, unexploded ammunition, and hazardous damaged military equipment.²²³ The lack of safety when accessing these areas prevents scientists from collecting soil samples, testing water quality, and determining the full amount of contamination to make a plan to fix it. The war has made it very difficult to monitor environmental issues and respond to them. A lack of access to marine environments has prevented researchers from conducting thorough analysis on the area. This prevents them from determining which areas are the most dangerous and which rehabilitation projects should be receiving attention first.²²⁴

Environmental conditions are also constantly changing because attacks continue to damage industrial facilities, energy systems, forests, and agricultural land. A location that has already been assessed could become contaminated again after another explosion or hazardous waste spill. This makes it difficult to create long-term rehabilitation plans. Military activity from ongoing conflict releases chemicals from ammunition and damaged vehicles into the environment.²²⁵ Attacks on industrial and energy facilities also release fuel, heavy metals, and toxic materials into the surrounding air, water, and soil. These pollutants can also travel far through rivers, wind, and natural food systems, which also means that contamination is not limited to the original location where an attack occurred.²²⁶

Forests are especially difficult to rehabilitate

while conflict continues. Since the war began, about 1.7 million hectares of Ukrainian forests have been affected or damaged by war. This accounts for about 15 percent of the country's entire forest cover. Forests near frontlines face habitat destruction, illegal tree cutting, explosive debris, and an increased risk for wildfires. In 2024, 965,000 hectares of land burned in Ukraine. This was more than twice the total area burned in the entire European Union (EU) during that same time period. Firefighters may not be able to reach these critical areas because of landmines and other leftover artillery. This allows fires to spread and destroy habitats before they can even be controlled.²²⁷

Climate change also makes this challenge even more severe. Climate change, which is the long term shift of Earth's average weather patterns and temperatures, is causing the world to get increasingly hotter from carbon emissions. Ukraine is facing hotter temperatures, droughts, flooding, and an overall increased risk of large fires. At the same time, damaged water systems make it difficult for communities to respond to droughts and extreme heat. This means that the effects of climate change and war are connected. The conflict damaged the ecosystems that

Ukraine needs in order to adapt to these extreme weather events caused by climate change. Climate change also makes damages caused by war even more severe.²²⁸

The ongoing war has also severely weakened Ukraine's health and emergency response systems. The conflict has led to the destruction of 699 hospitals, 84 ambulances, and has killed 198 healthcare professionals and injured another 137 employees. This limits the country's ability to treat people exposed to explosions, polluted air, toxic water, hazardous debris, and other environmental threats. Ukrainian sources estimate that there have been 87,000 casualties, 10 million Ukrainians displaced, and one-third of the population faces hunger as agricultural sectors are compromised and food security drops. Environmental rehabilitation is not just about restoring nature; it is also necessary for protecting public health and preventing additional pressures on Ukraine's damaged healthcare system. The environment provides food, water, and a safe place for communities to build homes and live. If the food and water are toxic, and the environment in which people live is being destroyed, public health will decline from improper nutrients and unsafe circumstances.²²⁹

A Ukrainian tank in a training exercise

Credit: 7th Army Training Command



Financial needs are one of the largest barriers to rehabilitation. Ukraine needs a large amount of resources to rebuild renewable energy infrastructure, transportation networks, and waste management facilities. It must also strengthen its government institutions so they can properly manage international assistance and carry out environmental reform by implementing regulatory frameworks and other policies. This government oversight and coordination is necessary to attract investment and make sure that recovery projects follow consistent standards. Without strong institutions and transparent policies, funding could be delayed or not even allocated.²³⁰

International cooperation is very important. The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and other organizations are helping Ukraine conduct environmental assessments, improve wastewater systems, and develop sustainable energy projects. Recent international decisions have also called for stronger collection of environmental data related to armed conflict. Accurate data helps determine where pollution is located, how dangerous it is, and what rehabilitation methods should be used. Partnerships between government agencies, scientists, local communities, and international donors will be crucial for helping Ukraine manage the scale of this ongoing environmental damage.²³¹

FUNDING AND RESOURCES FOR REHABILITATION

Years of environmental destruction have left Ukraine facing one of the most expensive

ecological recovery efforts to date. Restoring damaged ecosystems, removing hazardous waste, and rebuilding environmental infrastructure will require billions of dollars and several years of investment.²³² Environmental recovery efforts cannot wait for the war to be over. Every month of delay leads to further destruction of an already damaged environment. Currently, recovery is projected to take 50 to 70 years. Planning rehabilitation efforts and the financial support they require is an immediate necessity.²³³ As conflict continues, the financial resources needed for rehabilitation continue to grow, making funding one of the largest barriers to long-term recovery. Damage to forests, agricultural land, industrial facilities, water systems, and infrastructure all continue to add to the overall cost of environmental rehabilitation. This is creating a situation where recovery costs are growing much faster than rehabilitation efforts can be completed.²³⁴

When it comes to funding reconstruction needs, one source of funding is the communities local budget. More self-reliant communities take steps to increase their budget revenue by attracting investment, creating work opportunities, and promoting good environments for business development. Three quarters of these communities, however, are funded through state support. The war has increased differences in the financial abilities of different communities. Communities that are on the frontlines or in occupied territory, have seen mass destruction of their infrastructure. At this local level, active citizens, NGOs, volunteer movements, and local businesses play important roles in helping their

Currently, recovery is projected to take 50 to 70 years.

municipalities meet recovery needs. These local organizations often provide immediate assistance through organizing cleanup efforts, supporting damaged public facilities, and helping the overall community recover from environmental damage while larger funding is being secured. However, municipalities with the greatest damage are the least capable of generating local revenue because businesses have been destroyed and residents have been displaced. This places a lot of pressure on local governments that are already struggling to maintain basic public services.²³⁵

The Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine is the group that determines state funding within Ukraine. This includes deciding how to allocate and mobilize funding and when to engage international partners. Since Russia's invasion, financial support from international entities had almost quadrupled by the end of 2022.²³⁶ The issue with international support in this case is that most financial support is given in the form of loans, which adds to the country's overall debt. This is an issue because Ukraine's national debt already exceeds 100 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), which is the total money value of all goods and services sold within the country. This makes grants and donations much more favorable for the country when it comes to reconstruction efforts, as it does not contribute to their overall debt. State funding is also being divided among many competing priorities like military defense, healthcare, housing, and transportation. As a result, environmental rehabilitation often competes with other urgent reconstruction needs within a limited amount of funding.²³⁷

Financial institutions such as the World Bank Group, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Nordic Environment Finance Corporation (NEFCO), and others have launched different initiatives to support Ukraine. However, these groups prefer working directly with Ukrainian government banks rather than directly funding local municipalities

in need. In order for local communities to get more investment, they need to increase their institutional capacity in terms of how much project work they have and what they can execute. Many international financial institutions also require communities to demonstrate that projects are well planned, financially accountable, and capable of producing good results before approving funding. Smaller communities occasionally lack the capacity or expertise needed to prepare these grant applications. This means that some communities with the greatest environmental damage may struggle to receive funding despite urgent need. Strengthening local administrative capacity, therefore, becomes an important part of increasing access to financial resources.²³⁸

The Ukrainian Relief, Recovery, Reconstruction, and Reform Trust Block (URTF) is a key element currently supporting financing in Ukraine. The estimated cost of Ukraine's recovery over the next 10 years is 588 billion US dollars. URTF is working to collect grant resources and effectively distribute them to meet Ukraine's project needs. For example, URTF is helping fund Ukraine's Agriculture Recovery Inclusive Support Emergency (ARISE) Project. This project is aimed at maintaining "inclusive agricultural production and provid[ing] immediate and effective response to an eligible crisis or emergency." So far, URTF has provided a 415 million US dollar grant and secured a 230 million US dollar loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD). The overall project is estimated to cost 700 million US dollars, leaving a funding gap of only 55 million US dollars. By directing funding toward environmental restoration and agricultural rehabilitation at the same time, projects like ARISE support environmental recovery and economic development. Organizations like URTF are playing and will continue to play a large role as a financial resource in Ukraine's recovery.²³⁹

Another recent form of funding comes from the Executive Board of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF is a UN organization

with 191 countries that are working towards fostering global financial stability and reducing poverty.²⁴⁰ The IMF had an existing arrangement for a support package for Ukraine, and that arrangement was recently extended for another 48 months. This creates an additional 8.1 billion US dollars of funding under an Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement, which is a financial agreement provided by the IMF to help member countries solve serious payment problems. With Russia's war on Ukraine still continuing and not enough time left on the 2023 agreement, Ukrainian authorities requested this new funding extension. This will continue to help anchor financial stability, which will boost economic goals towards restoration programs.²⁴¹

CURRENT SCOPE OF DAMAGE

The current scope of damage in Ukraine is large and far-reaching. Military attacks have destroyed homes, cities, and critical infrastructure, releasing hazardous pollutants into the environment. Heavy metals, toxic chemicals, and radioactive materials have contaminated the country's air, water, and soil, making environmental rehabilitation increasingly difficult. Agricultural land has become unsafe for growing crops, greenhouse gas emissions towards climate change have gone up, and ecosystems have experienced widespread destruction with local animal species being driven towards extinction. Alongside environmental damage, the number of human casualties continues to grow, showing the far-reaching consequences of Ukraine's ongoing conflict.²⁴²

Civilians are facing ongoing attacks every day. On May 14, 2026, a Russian missile completely destroyed a nine-story apartment in Kyiv. This attack killed 24 people and injured 48 others. The destruction of this apartment not only led to casualties; it also led to the release of pollutants. When buildings constructed with older materials collapse, hazardous substances like asbestos and lead, which contaminate soil and water, are released into the surrounding

environment. These contaminants can remain in the air for long periods of time before settling into nearby soil and water, creating additional health risks for residents. The destruction of residential areas therefore creates both an immediate humanitarian crisis and a long-term environmental hazard that requires a lot of clean up and restoration efforts.²⁴³ Other damage to infrastructure has had large-scale impacts. As of August 2024, Russia had launched nine waves of long-range strikes, causing serious damage to power generation. Damage to these power grids caused energy production to stop altogether at some locations and amounted to about 14.6 billion US dollars in damage and restoration efforts. The destruction of energy infrastructure also affects critical public services. Hospitals, water treatment facilities, schools, and emergency response systems depend on reliable electricity to function. Extended power outages can have severe impacts on local infrastructure, making it difficult for communities to recover from attacks.²⁴⁴

As it stands, only 68 percent of Ukraine's overall population has access to a centralized water supply. This means that 1.7 million children do not have safe water access. The more rural the area, the larger the disparity is. Only 26 percent of rural villages have access to centralized water sources. What is even more alarming is that only one-third of all drinking water samples in Ukraine from these water sources meet national standards. Approximately 39,700 kilometers of water networks have been damaged, and the reconstruction challenge ahead will require 11.3 billion US dollars over the next ten years. Ukraine continues to show resilience through implementing projects like the Kharkiv Water Supply and Sanitation Recovery Roadmap. This roadmap introduces a plan that lasts until 2045 with nine strategic initiatives to reduce water loss and improve water quality. Ukraine is also making a conscious effort to implement more transparent monitoring systems for water quality.²⁴⁵

Before the war, the agricultural sector was one of the most developed sectors in the Ukrainian

economy. Agriculture employed over 22 percent of the entire working population. Small farmers are significantly impacted by water insecurity as they tend to be located in those rural villages with almost no water access. Lack of water sources along with rising heat from climate change is drying out farmland and making cultivation more difficult. The inability for plants to grow is also affecting ecosystems. As plant populations decrease, this also impacts the animals that depend on it for food. This issue trickles down the food chain.²⁴⁶

The marine ecosystems in the Black Sea have also taken an immense amount of damage. In mid-December 2024, two Russian oil tankers were hit with a heavy attack in the Kerch Strait, which connects the Sea of Azov with the Black Sea. One tanker sank completely and released 4,300 metric tons of mazut oil into the water. The other tanker continued to run, but it leaked an additional 2,000 metric tons of mazut oil. This type of oil is very thick and water resistant and creates a thick, tar-like layer on the top of the water. It is highly toxic for marine life. Due to its thickness, mazut oil is also known for being extremely difficult to clean up. This spill caused extreme environmental damage.

The Black Sea also faces the issue of loose naval mines. Both Russia and Ukraine laid mines in Odessa, a port city in Ukraine, that drifted out to sea over time. Due to the currents of the Black Sea, some of these mines washed up in Bulgaria and Romania. In January 2024, Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria established a naval task force to remove all loose mines from the Black Sea. This is beneficial to the marine environment and helps

Ukraine as it removes the cost burden for them of having to remove loose mines themselves.²⁴⁷

Air pollution continues to grow in Ukraine. A recent study found that on average, directly after an airstrike, pollutant concentration increases by 100 to 400 percent. For example, a drone strike in Kyiv in 2024 led to a large increase in carbon monoxide levels. Breathing in these clouds of toxic gas, even for a short period, can cause serious risks in children and elderly individuals with respiratory diseases. These individuals might experience shortness of breath or asphyxiation, the state of being unconscious due to lack of oxygen to the brain. The increased number of forest fires on frontlines due to artillery are also releasing large amounts of carbon monoxide into the air which can travel long distances and begin to affect other countries bordering Ukraine. These large amounts of carbon monoxide also contribute to ground-level ozone, which is a harmful air pollutant that can impact plants' ability to take in air and grow, and make it difficult for animals to breathe. Plants and animals both experience declining health as ozone builds. As long as the conflict continues, worsening air quality will stay an environmental and public health issue.²⁴⁸

Ukraine's environmental rehabilitation is closely connected to every aspect of the country's long-term recovery. The ongoing conflict has led to contaminated soil and water, damaged ecosystems, destroyed forests, hazardous debris, and less agricultural production. As the war continues, these environmental impacts become more widespread while the cost to fix it is growing. These challenges are tied to Ukraine's

Directly after an airstrike, pollutant concentration increases by 100 to 400 percent.

economic recovery, infrastructure reconstruction, and humanitarian needs. Alongside organizations like the OSCE, the UN has become an important aid through its environmental assessments, humanitarian assistance, and recovery planning. This provides a framework for international cooperation while supporting Ukraine's long-term recovery.

Bloc Analysis

POINT OF DIVISION

When approaching post-war reconstruction, countries differ in which aspects of recovery they believe should receive priority. Most OSCE participating countries recognize that Ukraine's long-term recovery will require addressing environmental, economic, and humanitarian challenges at the same time. Different governments, however, often place greater emphasis on one area over another based on their national priorities, foreign policy objectives, and available resources. These differing perspectives influence the types of policies countries support and shape surrounding Ukraine's long-term rehabilitation.

Some countries prioritize environmental rehabilitation. These countries believe the restoration of Ukraine's natural environment is a prerequisite for sustainable recovery in all other aspects. These states emphasize the recovery of contaminated soil and water, the safe removal of war debris, and the restoration of damaged ecosystems. Many also advocate for incorporating sustainable development principles into reconstruction by promoting renewable energy, climate resilience, and environmentally friendly infrastructure. From this perspective, fixing environmental damage is critical not only to protect public health and ecosystems but also to restore agriculture and ensure long-term food security.²⁴⁹

Other countries focus on economic and trade

recovery, arguing that rebuilding Ukraine's economy is the foundation for all other aspects of reconstruction. These countries prioritize restoring transportation, energy systems, exports, and industrial production. They generally support environmental recovery but advocate for prioritizing economic recovery or balancing it with environmental rehabilitation. By restoring economic activity, these countries believe Ukraine will be better positioned to take on long-term environmental rehabilitation.²⁵⁰

A third group of countries has taken a more limited role in Ukraine's rehabilitation efforts and are supporters for long-term recovery. These states have remained relatively absent during international discussions regarding environmental rehabilitation for Ukraine. As a result, these countries are less likely to advocate for environmental or economic recovery programs. Although the level of engagement from these countries varies, countries in this bloc represent a different perspective. They often approach rehabilitation efforts with different or minimal priorities than other states that have already been more active.²⁵¹

COUNTRIES PRIORITIZING ENVIRONMENTAL RECOVERY

Countries prioritizing environmental recovery in Ukraine are not only advocating for rehabilitation within the context of the war but are also recognized as global leaders in environmental sustainability. These countries view the reconstruction process as an opportunity to restore damaged ecosystems while building a more resilient and environmentally sustainable Ukraine. Rather than simply repairing damaged infrastructure, they support biodiversity conservation, pollution solutions, and sustainable construction practices. This bloc is likely to advocate for strong environmental standards, international cooperation, and investments into green technologies.²⁵²

Japan, Sweden, and South Korea have become leaders in promoting environmentally sustainable

recovery in Ukraine. Japan has been particularly vocal in supporting them. Japanese ambassador, Masashi Nakagome, has explicitly stated that “Japan’s experience and expertise can contribute to Ukraine’s efforts to build back better and greener.” Similarly, Sweden and South Korea have supported initiatives focused on renewable energy, climate resilience, and sustainable infrastructure and have funded conferences and environmental efforts in Ukraine. Other countries that align with these priorities include the Netherlands, Norway, and Romania, all of which have supported projects related to environmental restoration. Together these countries are likely to advocate for solutions that place environmental rehabilitation as the priority of Ukraine’s reconstruction.²⁵³

COUNTRIES PRIORITIZING ECONOMIC AND TRADE RECOVERY

Countries prioritizing economic and trade recovery believe that rebuilding Ukraine’s economy is the base for the country’s long-term recovery. These countries focus on restoring industrial production, modernizing infrastructure, reopening trade routes, and strengthening local economies to create jobs and attract investment. While they support environmental rehabilitation, they often argue for integrating sustainable practices into economic development rather than treating environmental restoration as a separate objective. Countries in this bloc are likely to support resolutions that encourage international investment, public-private partnerships, industrial innovation, and the reconstruction of transportation and energy infrastructure.

Germany has emerged as a leading advocate for this approach through its partnership with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). Germany has provided funding for UNIDO’s Green Industrial Recovery Program for Ukraine, which wants to strengthen municipalities, promote industrial innovation, and align reconstruction efforts with economic growth and environmental sustainability. The

initiative recognizes that local governments and industries will play a big role in rebuilding Ukraine’s economy.²⁵⁴

Other countries that align with this priority include Poland, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Turkey. All these countries have supported initiatives to restore Ukraine’s transportation networks, industrial capacity, energy infrastructure, and international trade. Together, these countries are likely to advocate for resolutions that prioritize economic security, investment, and industrial development as the foundation for Ukraine’s recovery.²⁵⁵

COUNTRIES WAITING FOR UKRAINE’S LONG-TERM RECOVERY

Countries with limited engagement in Ukraine’s reconstruction have generally taken a more cautious approach to supporting long-term recovery. While these countries often recognize the humanitarian and environmental impacts of the war, they have been less involved in large-scale reconstruction. The lack of involvement usually has to do with strategic, economic, or political considerations. Many countries seek to balance relationships with both Ukraine and Russia and emphasize diplomacy, respect for state sovereignty, and negotiated solutions rather than extensive international involvement. Countries in this bloc are more likely to support recovery efforts that avoid political or financial commitments while encouraging dialogue and regional stability.

China has emerged as one of the most prominent examples of this approach. Since the beginning of the conflict, China has avoided directly condemning Russia’s invasion, abstained on several UN votes, and emphasized the importance of negotiations while keeping close political and economic ties with Russia. Similarly, India has called for an end to the violence but has not condemned Russia outright. This reflects India’s long-standing economic relationship with Russia. Other countries that have taken similar positions include Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and

Tajikistan. Their close economic ties with Russia have led to minimal or no response towards the conflict. These countries are likely to advocate for resolutions that encourage humanitarian assistance and future recovery while limiting extensive international commitments.²⁵⁶

health, and economic recovery. The decisions made by this committee have the potential to shape Ukraine's environmental recovery for years to come.

Committee Mission

OSCE's mission is to prevent conflict, assist in times of crisis, and help with post-conflict rehabilitation. It recognizes that environmental destruction is not only an ecological issue; it leads to challenges with security, economic stability, and overall human well-being. The destruction of ecosystems, contamination of land and water, and damage to important infrastructure caused by the war in Ukraine are challenging for both the country's immediate recovery and its long-term stability. Addressing these challenges brings in a need for international cooperation.²⁵⁷

As a regional security organization, it is OSCE's role to facilitate cooperation between Ukraine and international partners. While OSCE does not have the authority to give large amounts of funding for reconstruction, it is an important platform for coordinating this international assistance and encouraging exchange of technical skills for rehabilitation. Through its field operations, existing partnerships with international organizations, and commitment to security and rehabilitation, OSCE can help create and encourage collaboration on environmental rehabilitation.²⁵⁸

Recovery in Ukraine will require innovative and realistic approaches that fall within the committee's mandate. Addressing areas such as strengthening environmental monitoring, improving regional cooperation on fixing air and water quality, protecting biodiversity, and promoting sustainable reconstruction processes are critical. Solutions should recognize the interconnectivity of environmental stability, public

Research and Preparation Questions

Your dais has prepared the following research and preparation questions as a means of providing guidance for your research process. These questions should be carefully considered, as they embody some of the main critical thought and learning objectives surrounding your topic.

TOPIC A

- 1 How has your country responded to the return of foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) and their families from conflict zones? What legal, security, and humanitarian concerns have shaped its approach?
- 2 How is your country addressing online radicalization, particularly among young people? What role should governments, social media companies, schools, and civil society play in preventing extremist recruitment?
- 3 What should the OSCE do about the misuse of emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, encrypted messaging, drones, and deepfakes? How can participating states regulate these technologies without limiting their legitimate civilian uses?
- 4 How does your country balance intelligence sharing with the protection of national sovereignty and individual privacy? What information is your government willing to share with other OSCE participating states, and what limits does it place on such cooperation?
- 5 How vulnerable is your country to terrorist financing through informal financial systems, cryptocurrencies, crowdfunding, or organized crime?
- 6 Which OSCE or national counter-terrorism measures has your country actually implemented, and how effective have they been in practice? Where do gaps remain between existing commitments and their implementation?

TOPIC B

- 1 How has your country responded to the environmental consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Ukraine thus far? Has your country provided financial, humanitarian, environmental, or technical help?
- 2 Which environmental consequences of war does your country view as most urgent: soil contamination, water pollution, air pollution, biodiversity loss, hazardous waste, or damage to infrastructure?
- 3 What methods could be used to assess environmental destruction in areas that are inaccessible or too dangerous because of ongoing fighting?
- 4 What has OSCE done in the past to help other countries with environmental rehabilitation? Was it successful? What aspects of environmental rehabilitation fall within the OSCE's scope, and where is it limited?
- 5 Which environmental problems can realistically be addressed during the ongoing war and which issues need to wait for conflict to be over?

Important Documents

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About the Authors

TOPIC A: EMILIA LAZO

Emilia Lazo is a senior at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, where she studies international relations with a focus on international security, foreign trade, and humanitarian affairs. Originally from Mexico City, she has been involved in Model United Nations since middle school, participating as a delegate representing various countries and later serving as a chair, and Secretary-General at several conferences. She joined NHSMUN as a delegate before returning as a staff member in 2026, when she served as Crisis Director for the Interim Government of Bangladesh. Beyond Model UN, Emilia is actively involved in activities related to her field of study. She has worked as a political intern at an embassy, where she gained professional experience and had the opportunity to work more closely with her interests in international affairs. In her university, being part of the Student Representative Group for International Relations Degrees in which she used to lead the Business and Private Sector Committee. She has also been part of the board members of IBEROMUN and has moderated committees, including the International Court of Justice and the Security Council.

TOPIC B: IZZY WALCHLI

Izzy Walchli is an undergraduate at Bentley University, where she majors in human resources with a minor in law. Born and raised in Miami, she has been involved in Model United Nations since 2023, competing as a delegate in multiple crisis and general assembly committees and earning best delegate multiple times. She has served as crisis manager at her high school's conference for two crisis committees and has served as president of her Model United Nations team at her college. Outside of Model UN, Izzy works as a tour guide for her school and is a part of the Lambda Tau chapter of the business fraternity, Delta Sigma Pi, where she has served as a professional activities chair. Izzy looks forward to completing her undergraduate degree and attending law school in the upcoming years.

Additional writing by Olivia Keller

Edited by Adam Allibhoy, Armen Bagdassarian, Ana Margarita Gil, Paxton Hemmingway, Sabeeh Mirza, Althea Turley, and Olivia Woodard

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