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Russia Controversy Overshadows OSCE Security Summit

By AFP

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A backdrop for this year's OSCE summit in North Macedonia. **OSCE / Flickr**

The world's largest regional security group opened its Skopje summit Thursday with Russia and Ukraine's allies in open conflict, rattling the organization that is intended as a forum for East-West blocs.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) has been struggling to survive with Russia blocking key decisions, including the group's budget.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's attendance at the Skopje gathering this week sparked a boycott from Ukraine and key allies.

Russia's 21-month-old invasion of Ukraine came in for fierce criticism ahead of Lavrov's speech at the summit.

"Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine flies in the face of all this organization holds dear," said Bujar Osmani, North Macedonia's foreign affairs minister and OSCE chairman in office, during opening remarks as the summit kicked off.

"The war undermines trust, dialogue, and our capacity to deliver," he added.

Lavrov fired back, saying the OSCE was becoming an "appendage" of the NATO alliance and the European Union.

"The organization, let's face it, is on the edge of a precipice. A simple question arises: does it make sense to invest in its revitalization?" said Lavrov, who immediately left the session after delivering his remarks.

The Russian foreign minister was set to hold a separate press conference on the sidelines of the summit on Friday.

Related article: Baltic States to Skip OSCE Meeting Over Lavrov Invite

Created in 1975 as a forum for dialogue between the Eastern and Western blocs, the OSCE has been struggling to operate as Russia's war in Ukraine has unleashed a torrent of tension in the organization.

Earlier this week, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania announced that they would boycott the annual ministerial conference, with Warsaw saying Russia's presence was "unacceptable."

Ukraine wants the OSCE to expel Russia, as the Council of Europe has done, warning the body faced a "slow death" if Moscow remains a member.

"We just cannot ignore the fact that the Russian minister of foreign affairs will be present at the table of the organization that is supposed to build peace and security in Europe," Polish Foreign Minister Szymon Szynkowski vel Sek told reporters on Wednesday.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who joined Wednesday's pre-summit dinner with representatives of other OSCE states, was not in attendance on Thursday.

Multilateralism

Late on Wednesday, the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, said he understood the unease of some states but welcomed the decision by North Macedonia to allow Lavrov to participate, saying it aligned with the "common objective of keeping multilateralism alive."

"It will be a good occasion for him (Lavrov) to listen directly from the participants at this meeting why Russia is being condemned and isolated," he told reporters.

After months of negotiations, Malta on Monday agreed to take over the organization's rotating presidency next year, replacing NATO member Estonia — who the Kremlin openly rejected.

The decision is expected to be ratified during the two-day ministerial meeting.

Ahead of the summit, Russia accused Western countries of trying to prevent its officials from attending the meeting.

"We see attempts by part of the West to do everything possible to hinder our country's normal participation at this meeting," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

She accused some countries — without naming them — of threatening "the very existence of the organization, just to satisfy their ambitions."

Russia's repeated criticism has fuelled speculation it could decide to pull out of the OSCE altogether, cutting another fragile line of communication with the West.

The OSCE has issued several reports on possible war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed by Russian Armed Forces during their full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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