# The Helsinki Process: An Overview

*(prepared by Helsinki Commission staff, June 2024)*

In August 1975, the heads of state or government of 35 countries – the Soviet Union and all of Europe except Albania, plus the United States and Canada – held a historic summit in Helsinki, Finland, where they signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This document is known as the Helsinki Final Act or the Helsinki Accords. The Conference, known as the CSCE, continued to hold follow-up meetings and is today institutionalized as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, based in Vienna, Austria.[1]

*Brezhnev and Ford in Helsinki, flanked by Kissinger and Gromyko*

[1] Isolationist and repressive Albania alone chose not to participate from the beginning through 1990 and was admitted into the CSCE the following year. By that time, the 1990 reunification of Germany had removed one seat from the table, but the subsequent restoration of independence of the three Baltic States and the later disintegration of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, along with the admission of Andorra, enlarged OSCE participation to 56 States by 2006. The inclusion of Mongolia as a 57th participant in 2012 represented the first actual enlargement of the OSCE region, which is often described as ranging "from Vancouver to Vladivostok." While recognized by almost two-thirds of the participating States and most definitely within Europe, Kosovo continues to be denied participating State status.

## CONFRONTING THE COLD WAR

The Helsinki Final Act was the culmination of "détente" in East-West relations that developed during the administrations of U.S. Presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford to ease Cold War tensions. The idea of a multilateral summit document, however, was initially proposed by the Soviet Union as early as 1954. Moscow primarily wanted this to serve as a post-World War II peace treaty confirming both border changes and the communist hold on the countries of East-Central Europe. The Soviets also originally wanted to use an all-European conference to drive a wedge between the United States and its West European allies and to thwart efforts to bring Germany into the NATO alliance. The West resisted, but East-West tensions were becoming more relaxed by the early 1970s, as West Germany's "Ostpolitik" increased regional stability and the Quadripartite Agreement on Berlin removed a barrier to broader talks between East and West.[2] As the Kremlin under Leonid Brezhnev continued to press, Western capitals saw advantages in going forward provided that humanitarian concerns could be advanced, their own security concerns could be addressed, and recognition of the status quo in Europe could be formally avoided. The result would be a politically binding accord rather than a legally binding treaty and would allow talks to begin on reducing conventional forces in Europe, where the Soviets had numerical superiority. During the latter half of 1973, Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks began in Vienna, while initiating and working phases of the CSCE negotiations began in Helsinki and in Geneva, Switzerland, respectively. Conventional arms control in Europe would thereafter remain linked to the Helsinki Process.

The Helsinki Final Act, signed after two years of negotiation, is divided into three chapters. The first deals with security concerns, beginning with a declaration on ten principles guiding relations between the participating States[3] and continuing with a set of Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs), such as notification and observation of troop maneuvers, designed to lessen the risk of surprise military attack in Europe, which became more urgent as troops amassed along the Iron Curtain following the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The second chapter deals with economic cooperation, joint efforts in fields of science and technology, and environmental protection. The third chapter addresses humanitarian concerns, including human contacts, free flow of information, and cultural and educational exchanges. Delegates literally dropped proposals for consideration into separate baskets for each field, so these chapters became known as Baskets I, II and III and today are known as the Politico-Military (First), Economic and Environmental (Second), and Human (Third) Dimensions of the process.[4] A short chapter on Mediterranean cooperation was added at the insistence of Malta and other countries, establishing partnerships for dialogue (but not decision-making) with non-participating Mediterranean States.

Many initially criticized President Ford for signing the Helsinki Final Act, but human rights advocates among the dissident communities of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe soon saw it as a new

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[2] The original Soviet proposal excluded the United States and Canada, a major reason for its rejection. The Quadripartite Agreement between the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and France (the Four Powers) provided for improved movement of people and goods to and from the Western Sectors of Berlin. Signed in 1971, it entered into force in 1972.

[3] The Helsinki Principles are as follows: 1) Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty; 2) Refraining from the threat or use of force; 3) Inviolability of frontiers; 4) Territorial integrity of States; 5) Peaceful settlement of disputes; 6) Non-intervention in internal affairs; 7) Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; 8) Equal rights and self-determination of peoples; 9) Cooperation among States; and 10) Fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law.

[4] While originally in the Principles Section of Basket I, human rights issues are now generally grouped with democracy-building and humanitarian concerns of today's Human Dimension.


*Solidarity protests in Poland*

opportunity. The Final Act included a uniquely comprehensive, political as well as military definition of security, with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as a guiding principle in state-to-state relations. These dissidents found they could play an important role in monitoring and reporting on their government's compliance with Helsinki provisions, since their findings by definition would have implications for European security. Members of the U.S. Congress visiting the Soviet Union not only agreed, but argued further that the U.S. Government should have an agency to defend the activity of the Helsinki Monitors, as they became known, and to make sure their findings would be taken into account first by policy-makers in the State Department and eventually by the foreign ministries of other signatory countries. Human rights violations would be recognized as legitimate international concerns rather than simply domestic matters. Thus, in June 1976, the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission) was created, despite the objections of the State Department under Henry Kissinger both to a stronger congressional role in U.S. foreign policy and to making human rights concerns a larger factor in relations with the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.[5] Helsinki-focused committees and other non-governmental groups with similar objectives also formed in the United States and around Europe.

The Final Act was adopted by consensus. This made the commitments it contained less ambitious but was key to later efforts to hold governments accountable for not implementing fully what they had accepted freely. These efforts mostly took the form of follow-up gatherings since known as the

[5] The Commission today consists of nine members of the U.S. Senate, nine members of the U.S. House of Representatives and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. At a 2005 Commission event, Dr. Kissinger admitted he did not originally believe the Helsinki provisions would have the scope and impact they later developed.

Helsinki Process. The first decade of the process took place during and immediately after Brezhnev's rule in the Soviet Union, a period marked by a severe downturn in Soviet and East European human rights performance, including persecution of the Helsinki Monitors, substantially lower emigration rates, the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the 1981 declaration of martial law in Poland, and confrontational incidents such as the 1983 Soviet downing of Korean Airlines flight 007. Under President Jimmy Carter, human rights gained a substantially more prominent place in U.S. foreign policy, and President Ronald Reagan gave this development a more decidedly anti-communist tone. At meetings in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, from 1977 to 1978 and in Madrid, Spain, from 1980 to 1983, the participating States engaged in increasingly frank debate over non-implementation and adopted new commitments only in Madrid, even then only marginally advancing what already had been adopted. They nevertheless agreed to keep meeting at various subsidiary meetings focused on a balanced array of specific topics and then to meet again in Vienna in 1986, despite renewed criticism of the Helsinki Process for failing to produce results. The process became, in fact, a diplomatic front line in the Cold War: the only collective forum where East and West were confronting their differences with the encouragement and assistance of the neutral and non-aligned (NNA) participants.[6]

The payoff was felt in Vienna from 1986 to 1989, as NATO and NNA countries successfully encouraged improved compliance with existing commitments within the Warsaw Pact and most


*Meeting of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Paris, 1990*

[6] Starting with Finland's 1972 invitation to host its opening, the Neutral and Non-Aligned, known as the N+N or NNA, became a distinct group in CSCE that was critical to facilitating agreement between NATO and Warsaw Pact groups of participating States.

critically in the Soviet Union during the ascendance of Mikhail Gorbachev.[7] Soviet allies divided between those communist regimes which resisted any change at all and those which reformed to enhance ties with democratic neighbors across the Iron Curtain. Meanwhile, the participating States in Vienna adopted ambitious new commitments and launched new talks in many areas but especially in the fields of security and human rights, with balanced progress between the two fields remaining essential to consensus.[8]

## RESPONDING TO CHANGE

Originally criticized as a diplomatic sellout and official recognition of the legacy of the Yalta conference of World War II allies, the Helsinki Process played a pivotal role in bringing the Cold War to an end by encouraging peaceful, internal changes that reunited rather than accepted the division of Europe. It was therefore an appropriate venue for a second summit of leaders to signal the Cold War's end and embrace democratic norms with the adoption of a "Charter for a New Europe" in Paris, France, in 1990. The Paris Summit also initiated an effort to institutionalize and regularize the Helsinki Process which had previously been maintained only by agreeing at each follow-up meeting to meet again for another. Made possible by the efforts of the administrations of George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton in the United States and with the cooperation of Russia under Boris Yeltsin, additional work at subsequent follow-up meetings, coupled with summits, created the framework for the organization as it exists today.[9] This framework includes a Permanent Council of participating States and a parallel Forum for Security Cooperation located in Vienna and supported by an international Secretariat; a one-year rotation of the chairmanship among the participating States at the level of foreign minister; annual meetings of foreign ministers and periodic summits; an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in Warsaw, Poland; a Parliamentary Assembly in Copenhagen, Denmark; separate institutions focusing on the key issues of national minorities and free media; senior officials appointed to work on other important matters; and ongoing field activities, particularly in conflict-torn countries and for election observation. Mechanisms were also created, particularly in the Politico-Military and Human Dimensions, to respond to situations more rapidly or without the requirement of consensus. The concept of partnerships with non-participating States bordering the Mediterranean was extended into Asia. Reflecting these changes, in 1995 the "Conference on" became an "Organization for" Security and Cooperation in Europe.

A product of the Cold War, the Helsinki Process successfully adapted to the post-Cold War environment of the 1990s, becoming a cost-effective diplomatic tool able to respond to new challenges. The OSCE negotiated a web of interlocking and mutually reinforcing arms control agreements that expanded military transparency and openness while encouraging further reductions in conventional force levels across the region. It was able to devote considerable effort to developing standards for free and fair elections, democratic institutions, and the rule of law, and fielding observation teams to

[7] Progress actually began just prior to the Vienna Follow-Up Meeting with the adoption in Stockholm, Sweden, of a new security agreement, the first of several on arms control in the late 1980s and a breakthrough in allowing inspections to verify compliance. It also served as a basis for calls for balanced progress in the Helsinki Process, since no agreement was reached at simultaneous experts' meetings on human rights and related humanitarian issues in Ottawa, Canada; Budapest, Hungary; and Bern, Switzerland.

[8] Negotiations in Vienna enhanced the Security Dimension, marked by further work on what were now called Confidence- and Security-Building Measures (CSBMs) and the replacement of MBFR talks with new Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) talks. These were balanced by establishing a Conference on the Human Dimension consisting of three meetings in Paris (1989), Copenhagen (1990) and Moscow (1991) before the next follow-up meeting in Helsinki in 1992.

[9] Summits were held in Helsinki in 1992; Budapest in 1994; Lisbon, Portugal in 1996; and Istanbul, Turkey, in 1999. A summit was also held in Astana, Kazakhstan, in 2010, but it remains less significant in the historical development of the Helsinki Process.

*OSCE headquarters at the Hofburg Palace in Vienna*

encourage progress. There was also an early understanding that nationalism – a repressed form of dissent in communist states – would become a natural draw to people suddenly free, and that extreme nationalism would lead to intolerance, tension and conflict as took place in the former Yugoslavia. The OSCE responded by deploying field missions first in the Balkans and later the Caucasus and elsewhere to deter conflict spillover and assist in post-conflict recovery, including election administration, police training, border monitoring, sub-regional arms control, and building democratic institutions. Its focus shifted from diplomatic negotiation in Vienna to an operational presence in the field.

The OSCE has also taken responsibility for developing international responses to concerns that are not simply unique to a few countries failing to implement their commitments, but common to many if not all. Among these concerns are manifestations of anti-Semitism and other forms of social or religious intolerance, trafficking in persons, the profound prejudice against Roma throughout Europe, organized crime and official corruption, energy security, terrorism and the proliferation of weapons ranging from small arms to those capable of mass destruction. The OSCE sometimes leads an international response, while other times it plays a supportive role, often as a regional contributor to a global effort.

## LOOKING TO AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

In recent years, advances stemming from the Helsinki Process have been fairly limited. The European Union and NATO each include nearly half of the OSCE States and have assumed peacekeeping, civil policing, and other responsibilities that might otherwise have been carried out by the OSCE. Within the OSCE, responsibility for holding governments accountable for implementation of Helsinki commitments has been increasingly relegated to institutions that are also vulnerable to retaliatory pressure regarding budgets and senior appointments. Field resources are not easily redeployed based

on changing needs or concern. Chairmanships often find it challenging to balance their OSCE responsibilities and national foreign policy priorities, and the domestic records of some do not exemplify OSCE ideals. Efforts to grant OSCE personnel legal protections that would facilitate their work have been held hostage to an attempt to link any advances to a full renegotiation of the entire body of OSCE commitments. Even so, organizational reforms would likely only marginally increase the OSCE's effectiveness. Indeed, the relative vitality of the organization continues to rest on the political will of participating States and their implementation of commitments.

Lamentably, among the OSCE States, a far more aggressive and repressive Russia under Vladimir Putin has made denial of consensus on key issues in the OSCE the norm, especially in the Human Dimension. Other countries have been unwilling to reform their Soviet-era political culture or succumbed to authoritarian leadership. Some host governments have become hostile to OSCE field activity intended to foster democratic development. Meanwhile, events elsewhere around the globe shifted U.S. foreign policy priorities under Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The global economic downturn of 2008 served as a brake on new initiatives due to lack of funds and confidence. Either because of security or economic considerations, a sense of vulnerability regarding their own records, or growing assaults on liberal democracy and societal tolerance, countries that previously promoted the Helsinki Process for its bold and frank diplomacy have become less outspoken in their advocacy. Russia's illegal occupation of Crimea and aggression against Ukraine in 2014 led to the development of new field responses and renewed appreciation for OSCE capabilities. Although President Donald Trump's approach to transatlantic relations generated uncertainty about the United States' enduring commitment to multilateralism and advocacy for human rights abroad, the U.S. approach to the OSCE remained relatively consistent, and President Joe Biden has further emphasized engagement.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 constitutes a clear, gross and thus far uncorrected violation of all Helsinki principles and presents the greatest challenge to security and cooperation in the OSCE region since the end of the Cold War. The degree to which the OSCE is effective in responding to this exigency and facilitating an end to hostilities and the restoration of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity will be a critical measure of the OSCE's enduring relevance in uncertain times.


*The OSCE in the field*