

# **Preface: The Final Act? The Legacy and Future of the Helsinki Principles**

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Anniversaries are usually moments to celebrate, and to look forward to the future. Sadly, the Golden Jubilee of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act is not such an occasion for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

On 1 August 1975, after more than two years of deliberations, 35 heads of state and government came together in Helsinki for a historical Summit to adopt the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). They were united in their objective of “promoting better relations among themselves and ensuring conditions in which their people can live in true and lasting peace free from any threat to or attempt at their security” and were convinced of “the need to exert efforts to make détente both a continuing and an increasingly viable and comprehensive process, universal in scope.”

Despite these lofty words in the opening paragraphs, few of the signatories and even fewer of the skeptics at that time could have imagined the long-term significance of that document. It made a crucial link between security and human rights, one that lives on in the title of this journal. And it contributed to closer cooperation and stronger accountability among these 35 states. Furthermore, although the Act was seen by many as a way of anchoring a balance of power between East and West during the Cold War, it became a key reference point for those calling for changes within and between states in a divided Europe. Indeed, while it is an oversimplification to say that the Helsinki Final Act paved the way for the erosion of totalitarian Communist regimes in Europe and contributed to drawing aside the Iron Curtain, it certainly changed relations between states as well as between leaders and their people. It also became a rallying point for brave civil society organizations, particularly in the communist bloc, to hold their leaders accountable to the promises that they had made to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. It inspired the creation of Helsinki Committees across the OSCE area, including of course the Netherlands Helsinki Committee, under whose auspices the Security and Human Rights Monitor is administered.

Fifteen years after the Helsinki Final Act, the 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe proclaimed that the “era of confrontation and division in Europe has ended”, and a “new era of Democracy, Peace and Unity” had begun. In the years to follow, governments agreed to detailed commitments in the politico-military, economic and environmental as well as human dimensions, developing a comprehensive security concept. They created innovative institutions and diplomatic processes to help states turn their commitments into action. Several summits consolidated progress. The CSCE turned into the OSCE. In countries emerging from communist rule, transformation processes were supported, rule of law strengthened, and elections observed. Arms control and confidence-building measures helped peace to take hold. Conflict prevention tools were developed, early warning capacities established, and crisis management mechanisms put in place. Peer review processes were designed to help states track implementation of their commitments. Investigative mechanisms were created to respond to grave human rights violations. Field missions brought support to the national and local levels. Cross-border cooperation intensified.

But the Charter of Paris did not usher in the end of history. Already in the early 1990s, it was evident that the process of post-Cold War transition would not be as easy as some had hoped. Still, problems seemed solvable and challenges manageable, not least by states working together through the OSCE.

That started to change in 2008 already with the Russian invasion of Georgia, then in 2014 with Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, and in 2022 with its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Over the past two decades almost all ten principles of the Helsinki Final Act have been violated. Furthermore, the international order created after the Second World War based on the Charter of the United Nations, adopted 80 years ago, has been shattered.

Danger and complexity are compounded by new threats, including many not foreseen in the Final Act such as climate change, the impact of technology on human rights and security, and transnational threats and challenges such as organized crime, corruption, or forced migration.

As a result, half a century after heads of state and government from two opposing blocs, and the neutral and non-aligned countries in-between, agreed on a forward-looking agenda designed to foster peace, we are far away from recognizing indivisibility of security in Europe, and common interest in the development of cooperation throughout the whole of Europe and beyond is fading. In the OSCE framework, the political and diplomatic process, governed by consensus and a minimum of mutual trust, has all but come to a standstill although operations, institutions and field missions continue to function, even without a formal budget.

If the mood is gloomy and the situation so dire, why have a special issue of this journal? We felt that since the Final Act is the bedrock of the OSCE and the inspiration behind Helsinki Committees, as well as this journal, we could not let the anniversary pass without reflecting on its significance.

That is why we have asked a number of veterans from the Helsinki process to share their personal insights and reflections: to look back; to reflect on what is left of the “spirit of Helsinki” and the principles and commitments of the Final Act; and to look ahead to the prospects for security and cooperation in Europe at such a tumultuous time. The style of the contributions is more essayistic than purely academic, but we wanted to draw on the personal experience of those who have been close to the OSCE in order to give readers valuable insights. It goes without saying that all contributions reflect the views of the writers only, and do not necessarily reflect our view, or that of the journal and its editorial board or the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and its donors.

As OSCE veterans ourselves, we have attempted to provide a broad spectrum of experiences, opinions, and insights about a process which has been exceptional in defining comprehensive security, challenges and responses.


We are grateful to all authors who have responded so enthusiastically, and for their contributions. We are also grateful to the editorial team at Security and Human Rights for embracing this project and the Netherlands Helsinki Committee and the donors who have made this possible.

As strong believers in cooperative security and multilateralism, we sincerely hope that we are not witnessing the final act of the OSCE. Rather, we wish that the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act can remind readers of the historical significance of this document, the enduring relevance of its principles, and the need for them to be fully respected for the sake of peace, security, and justice and cooperation within and between states. Our future depends on it.

A number of articles will be published on-line to coincide with the anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act on 1 August, others will be published in the autumn. A hard copy of the full volume of contributions will be available in late November, in time for the OSCE Ministerial Meeting in December.

We hope you will enjoy these pieces and will, in your own way, reflect on the historical significance and enduring legacy of the Helsinki Final Act.





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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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