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The Inspiration of the Helsinki Final Act for Civil Society in Ukraine

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Abstract

This essay examines the enduring impact of the Helsinki Final Act on Ukrainian civil society, arguing that human rights commitments remain crucial to security and peacebuilding. It chronicles the development of Helsinki Committees and the Centre for Civil Liberties' evolution from documentation of abuses to international advocacy, including evidence-gathering, support for survivors, and campaigns for accountability. The paper situates civil society as a bridge between victims and institutions, emphasizes the need to integrate human rights into reconstruction, and warns that without robust transnational solidarity and legal remedies, sustainable peace will remain unattainable.

"I never dreamt that the communist regime could fall in my lifetime" recalls Martin Šimečka, the Slovak journalist and writer, reflecting on his upbringing during the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia.[1] The Helsinki Final Act played a pivotal role in the end of the Cold War and the liberation of millions of people in Eastern Europe. Crucially, it established a respect for "human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief", forming a solid foundation for peace across Europe.[2]

By linking security to human rights and the rule of law, the human dimension created a mechanism for bringing domestic human rights violations under international political scrutiny. This led to a dissident movement in the USSR and the Eastern Bloc.[3] Figures such as Andrei Sakharov and Václav Havel, among others, spoke out about falsehoods and violations of the totalitarian state.[4]

Václav Havel's reflections on civic dissent ask us to picture a greengrocer in communist Czechoslovakia who displays the slogan "Workers of the world, unite!" in his shop window. The grocer is unlikely to genuinely believe in international proletarian solidarity; rather, he displays the sign to signal loyalty to the regime and avoid potential reproach. He is not risking imprisonment or job loss, but he fears being criticised for lacking the correct public "decoration." The slogan also enables him to mask his pragmatic self-interest — his wish to get by — with a loftier pretext. By doing so, he accepts the rules of a game that asks him to live within a lie. Thus, when someone enters wearing a lapel pin of the Solidarity movement, the grocer's pretence is undone. Confronted with people who openly declare their convictions, both his façade and the façade of the game collapses. In Havel's terms, these are individuals striving to "live in truth."[5]

The Helsinki Accords were an inspiration for those who sought to live in truth. It inspired and enabled individuals and groups supporting the protection of human rights to formally organise themselves into an OSCE-wide network of Committees and Watch/Monitor groups, with the primary aim of monitoring adherence to the human rights commitments set out in the Helsinki Final Act and its subsequent follow-up documents. This included a distinct Ukrainian Helsinki Committee, (the Ukrainian Helsinki Group), which was founded in

1 Martin M. Simecka, How the Helsinki Final Act changed my life, https://www.eurozine.com/how-the-helsinki-final-act-changed-my-life/, 2025

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Final act of the 1st CSCE Summit of Heads of State or Government, 1975, Retrieved 5 November 2025, https://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act

3 The Economist, A chronicle of heroism in the Soviet Union, Apr 8th 2020, Retrieved 7 November 2025, https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2020/04/08/a-chronicle-of-heroism-in-the-soviet-union

4 Anne Applebaum, Autocracy Inc. The Dictators Who Want to Run the World, New York: Doubleday, 2024, p. 100

5 Vaclav Havel, "The Power of the Powerless", 1978, Retrieved 29 October 2025, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/wp-content/uploads/1979/01/the-power-of-the-powerless.pdf, p. 6

1976[6]. It was the largest and most repressed Helsinki Group in the USSR. Apart from assessing human rights information from OSCE member states, the Helsinki Committees acted as a hub, sharing that material with governments, international organisations, journalists, and the general public.

The Helsinki Committees established in Ukraine and Russia became the first human rights organisations in the modern sense of this term. They remain relevant even after the fall of the Iron Curtain and have evolved into world-class human rights NGOs, such as Helsinki Watch, which later became Human Rights Watch.

Ultimately, the Helsinki movement has always insisted that human rights, the rule of law, and democracy — the human dimension of security — are not merely topics for discussion among states, but vital concerns that affect everyone. Despite the turbulent times we face, the opportunity to defend and promote the principles of the Helsinki Final Act remains.

What the Helsinki Principles Mean for Ukrainians Today

Russia's aggression against Ukraine poses an existential threat to human rights and democratic institutions across Europe and the OSCE. So far, discussions of peace and reconstruction have not given human rights the focused attention they require. That must change: human rights are a fundamental basis for peace and democratic security in Ukraine and beyond. Although human rights and peacebuilding are often treated as distinct fields, withthe former shaped by norms and values, and the latter by political pragmatism, this separation obscures their essential unity. Human rights and conflict resolution are complementary and mutually reinforcing; efforts to end armed conflict and rebuild societies should integrate the perspectives of both human rights advocates and conflict-resolution practitioners.

Over the past three years**,** the OSCE has been under pressure since the region has been largely defined by human-rights violations and international crimes linked to Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. At the same time the rule of law and fundamental freedoms have eroded dramatically in Russia and Belarus, and more recently in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. The adoption of Russia-inspired "Foreign Agents" laws has left human-rights defenders especially exposed, forcing many into exile or to abandon their work. While the decline in rights has been somewhat less abrupt in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, conditions there remain deeply troubling. By contrast, Azerbaijan's recent political realignment and the relatively greater openness to civil-society activity in Moldova, Armenia and Ukraine offer positive trends and strategic opportunities.

Although the OSCE consensus rule has limited the OSCE's effectiveness, the organisation can still do important work. For example, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in documents war crimes in Ukraine as the secretariat of the Moscow Mechanism.[7] Established in 1991, the mechanism permits one or more participating States to request that ODIHR inquire whether another participating State will invite a mission of experts to examine a clearly defined human dimension question on its territory.

6 Formally known as the Ukrainian Public Group to Promote Compliance with the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe

7 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Moscow Mechanism experts present report on Ukraine to OSCE Permanent Council, 2025, Retrieved 31 October 2025, https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/598057

The latest report was presented to the OSCE Permanent Council on 25 September.[8] It examines possible violations and abuses of International Humanitarian and human rights law, war crimes and crimes against humanity, related to the treatment of Ukrainian Prisoners of War (POWs) by the Russian Federation.With the start of Russia's full-scale aggression in 2022, the OSCE has called for human rights to be placed at the heart of any vision or eventual process for peace in Ukraine. The priority remains to silence the weapons and stop Russia's war of aggression. However, it is essential for Ukraine that the vision does not end there. The ambition must be to shape a just and sustainable peace, safeguarding a future for the people of Europe.The human rights pillar framework exists to underpin peace and promote human flourishing, rooted in principles that should guide the path toward it.

How civil society is helping put commitments into action

It is not only the role of governments to ensure the implementation of OSCE commitments. Just as in the 1970s and 1980s, when Helsinki Committees, human rights organisations and activists emphasised the importance of governments to uphold their commitments, civil society organisations today can also play a crucial role. The Centre for Civil Liberties (CCL) in Ukraine is a good example. For 18 years (since 2007), the Centre has been working to protect people's rights in Ukraine and in the OSCE region and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2022.

As Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine continues, the defence of human rights and international justice has never been more urgent. The Centre for Civil Liberties has played a key role in documenting war crimes, advocating for accountability, and mobilising global support for Ukraine's civil society. Since the full-scale invasion, CCL has expanded its efforts to collect evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity, working closely with international institutions to ensure justice for the victims and putting the people first.

Beyond documentation, CCL leads international advocacy efforts, particularly in calling for the creation of a special tribunal to hold Russian leadership accountable for the crime of aggression against Ukraine. The organisation collaborates with institutions such as the United Nations, the International Criminal Court, the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

For genuine peace or even a sustainable ceasefire, Ukraine's Western allies must consider the human dimension. When you think only about economic benefits, security issues, or geopolitical interests, even if you benefit in the short term, you are only biding your time for a catastrophe in the long term.

Today an intensification of cooperation between OSCE and Ukraine is needed more than ever due to Russia's military and hybrid aggression against the entire European security order and the challenges posed by Russia using war crimes as a method of warfare and the challenges posed by the new US administration, which pursues a more "transactional" approach with very different views on Transatlantic cooperation compared to previous administrations.

Moldova and Georgia also need support to strengthen their resilience against external interference. Both have suffered from Russia's aggression in the past and have territories presently occupied by Russia. The CCL's

8 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Report on Possible Violations and Abuses of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, Related to the Treatment of Ukrainian POWs by the Russian Federation, 2025, Retrieved 31 October 2025, https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/598042

mission is to promote human rights, democracy, and solidarity in Ukraine and the Eurasia region, affirming human dignity. Its goal is “to implement the mission, that is, to affirm the values of human rights,” and advocacy is one of the main tools it uses to achieve its goals.

In 2013, the Revolution of Dignity marked the beginning of an important stage for both the country and CCL. The Center launched the “Euromaidan SOS” initiative, uniting thousands of people to provide legal aid and other forms of assistance to protesters persecuted by the Ukrainian authorities.
In 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the Centre sent its own mobile teams to document war crimes – becoming the first human rights organisation in the world to do so. Since then, during all these years, CCL has been collecting stories told by people who survived captivity, the families of the victims, as well as those who witnessed war crimes.

The Center for Civil Liberties is actively working to free all illegally imprisoned Ukrainians. One of the most successful examples of the Center’s advocacy work was the #SaveOlegSentsov international campaign. Thousands of people in about 40 countries around the world simultaneously organised demonstrations with a common appeal to their governments to help release Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov and other political prisoners. These persistent efforts have borne fruit. After the full-scale Russian invasion, this initiative evolved into the Prisoner’s Voice project, a campaign aimed at the release of all civilian prisoners without any terms and conditions or prisoner exchanges. After all, this is exactly what is guaranteed by the Geneva Conventions.

CCL’s relevance and activities go beyond Ukraine. Since 2022, it has served as the secretariat for the Civic Solidarity Platform, a network of over 90 human rights and civil society organiations spanning from the US to Kazakhstan. Working across countries, it supports local member organisations in promoting and defending human rights. A key aspect of its work is advancing the human rights policy objectives of our network partners. Our partners regularly engage with their governments to advance legislation and policy reforms that safeguard human rights and promote democratic governance. We assist by reinforcing international human rights norms and translating those norms into advocacy for domestic legal change or for international mechanisms that ensure accountability when national systems are ineffective.

We promote the universality of rights, resist the erosion or instrumentalisation of the legal framework, take steps to safeguard international law and justice mechanisms, and focus attention on violations and the responsibilities of perpetrators. More often than not, the problem is rooted in the failure of states to live up to their commitments and responsibilities rather than deficiencies in international law or institutions. In recent years, CCL has observed a clear shift: member organisations are concentrating more on domestic engagement and less on international advocacy. This trend frames our discussion today — in many OSCE countries, the space for domestic advocacy is shrinking or gone. Independent civil society remains and requires support, but its work is often no longer visible in the public sphere. That is why solidarity is so vital.

As of 2014, the CCL-wide network, comprising Ukrainian and international NGOs, active community members, survivors, lawyers, and human rights activists, serves as a bridge between the affected community and various stakeholders, including international specialists and practitioners focused on various forms of support. Despite ongoing pressure and being declared “undesirable” in Russia, the organisation continues its activities,

demonstrating professionalism, independence, and resilience.[9]

In 2024, the Centre for Civil Liberties, together with its partners Ukrainian Helsinki Human Rights Union and Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, responded to incoming requests to support survivors and facilitate access to legal and non-legal services, including advice and information, access to psychosocial support, and referral pathways to legal support, representation, and non-legal social support services.

We aspire to bridge the information gap between victims and survivors of international crimes and available resources, to provide them quicker and more effective access to justice. Unfortunately, in Ukraine, we have plenty of experience in dealing with such cases.

As the war persists, war crimes are committed with alarming frequency, and the number of victims continues to grow. With each passing day, trust and hope among victims diminish, increasing the risk of widespread disillusionment within affected communities toward both international and national mechanisms that are struggling to deliver justice and meaningful redress. Our work aims to restore trust in the international rules-based order and the International Criminal Court (ICC). Furthermore, the CCL's work to educate the public on IHL rules is based on the idea that a sound understanding of the law is essential for effective application and, consequently, for the protection of victims of armed conflicts.

In short, for civil society in Ukraine, the Helsinki Accords are not a legacy of the past. While they were a landmark of European diplomacy, they retain their relevance today. As in the past, the inclusion of civil society within the OSCE framework and the enduring relevance of OSCE human rights commitments, even while they are being egregiously violated, enables non-state actors to press governments to implement the principles of the Helsinki Accords.

What sign would Havel's greengrocer put in the window today? Today, the medium is different. Signalling is done in virtual space, spreading the message faster and further. For civil society, messages are amplified by transnational networks, diasporas, international NGOs and digital platforms. At the same time, authoritarian playbooks have become more sophisticated through legal repression, disinformation, "foreign agent" laws, and economic pressure. Those twin forces, the growing reach ofcivic voices, and the stronger tools to silence them, make OSCE's cooperation with independent non-state actors not a decorative add-on but a strategic necessity. By standing up for respect for its principles and commitments, the OSCE community can help empower the powerless.

When local activists, victim groups, independent journalists and NGOs can act openly and securely they pierce the façade of imposed narratives in the same way the Solidarity pin unmasked the greengrocer's empty slogan.

A robust OSCE that integrates and protects civil society does more than monitor compliance with commitments; it strengthens the social infrastructure that turns private convictions into public pressure, makes state rhetoric verifiable, and thereby upholds the human-dimension pillar that the Helsinki Final Act

9 Both Kyiv based Center for Civil Liberties and international Civic Solidarity Platform are "undesirable" in Russia. Under Russian law, cooperation with such organisations may entail administrative and criminal liability for Russian citizens.

established half a century ago.

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