



## The Helsinki Final Act at 50: Relevant, or a relic?

by Ian Bond, 28 July 2025

The Helsinki Final Act played a key role in ending the Cold War, but the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), to which it gave birth, has progressively been sidelined in Europe's security architecture. Do the Final Act and the OSCE have a future?

[The Final Act of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe](#) (CSCE), signed in Helsinki on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1975, was one of the most important products of the period of *détente* between the West and the Soviet bloc in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It was initially regarded by many in the West as a victory for the Soviet Union, enshrining Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe in return for unenforceable promises to respect human rights. It turned out to be anything but. Western governments and dissident movements in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union used its human rights commitments as standards to which they could hold communist regimes accountable, putting them on the defensive and gradually increasing the pressure on them to take steps to implement what they had signed up to.

Following the Cold War, the CSCE (often referred to as 'the Helsinki process') became a fully-fledged international organisation (the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe – OSCE) and continued to build on the norms set out in the Final Act. Fifty years later, however, we are in a very different Europe. Are the Final Act and the OSCE anything more than historical relics?

### What is the Helsinki Final Act?

The Helsinki Final Act was intended to balance the Soviet Union's wish to gain Western acceptance of a permanent post-war division of Europe against the West's desire to keep open the possibility of peaceful change. The CSCE brought together 33 European countries, plus the US and Canada. The only European countries to stay out of the CSCE were Albania and Andorra; even The Holy See was a participating state.

The CSCE formally convened in Helsinki in July 1973, held negotiations in Geneva from September 1973 to July 1975, and concluded with a summit meeting in Helsinki from July 30<sup>th</sup> to August 1<sup>st</sup> 1975,

where the heads of state or government of all 35 states signed the Final Act. The Final Act is not a legally binding treaty, however: participating states describe its commitments, and subsequent CSCE/OSCE commitments, as ‘politically binding’.

The Final Act consists of three ‘baskets’ (in CSCE/OSCE jargon), covering security; economics, science and the environment; and humanitarian issues; plus a short section, at the insistence of Malta, on security and co-operation in the Mediterranean.

The first basket, though the shortest, contained the most important elements of the Final Act. First, the ‘Declaration on principles guiding relations between participating states’ set out ten principles, mostly self-explanatory. The first principle, on ‘Sovereign equality and respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty’, acknowledges the right of every participating state to choose both its own political, social, economic and cultural systems, and its own friends: the so-called Hamlet clause speaks of the right “to be or not to be a party to treaties of alliance”.

The next four principles, on ‘Refraining from the threat or use of force’, ‘Inviolability of frontiers’, ‘Territorial integrity of states’ and ‘Peaceful settlement of disputes’, deal with prohibitions on attacking other states and seeking to change their borders by force or coerce them in other ways. The sixth principle, ‘Non-intervention in internal affairs’ included pledges not to use “political, economic or other coercion”, and not to support terrorist or subversive activities “directed towards the violent overthrow of the regime of another participating State”. The seventh principle, ‘Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief’ recognised, implicitly, a correlation between a state’s human rights record and the way it was treated by other participating states. This principle also established the right of individuals to know and act on their rights – a valuable tool for dissidents in the communist bloc. The eighth, ‘Equal rights and self-determination of peoples’ proclaimed that “all peoples always have the right, in full freedom, to determine, when and as they wish, their internal and external political status, without external interference”. The ninth and tenth, ‘Co-operation among States’ and ‘Fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law’ dealt with efforts to improve relations, and the need to respect international law, in particular the UN Charter; and to “pay due regard to and implement the provisions” of the Final Act itself.

The first basket also included military confidence-building measures, of which the most important provision was that military exercises involving more than 25,000 troops should be notified to other participating states at least 21 days in advance. Participating states were encouraged to invite observers from other states to their military manoeuvres.

The second basket was intended to increase East-West trade and economic contacts, including by lowering trade barriers, while taking account of the different economic systems of the capitalist West and the communist East. It covered areas such as conditions for foreign business representatives; joint involvement in projects of common interest in sectors such as energy and transport; scientific and technological co-operation; co-operation in controlling pollution; and improving conditions for migrant workers.

The third basket partly reflected Western pre-occupations with the impact of the Iron Curtain on families divided by it. The participating states agreed for example to “favourably consider” applications to visit family members living in other states. Other provisions were designed to make it easier to distribute information in other participating states, and to improve conditions for foreign journalists. There were also provisions that encouraged cultural, educational and scientific exchanges and the learning of foreign languages.

## The heyday of the Helsinki process, and its downfall

The first decade of the CSCE was marked by unproductive review meetings, through which the West tried to hold communist countries to account for failure to live up their commitments. Only when Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in the Soviet Union in 1985 did the communist bloc start taking CSCE human rights and democracy commitments seriously. In October 1991, at a CSCE meeting on the human dimension held in Moscow, participating states “categorically and irrevocably declare[d] that the commitments undertaken in the field of the human dimension of the CSCE are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating states and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the state concerned” – a significant step forward from the previous Soviet position that raising human rights issues constituted interference in its internal affairs.

Within three months of that meeting the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, but all the states that emerged from it and from Yugoslavia (except for Kosovo – not recognised by some participating States), joined the CSCE/OSCE and signed up to the Helsinki Final Act. Throughout the 1990s, the CSCE (which became the OSCE in 1995) continued to play an important part in the transition of Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states to democracy, and in the post-conflict stabilisation of the former Yugoslav states. Its corpus of human rights and military transparency commitments expanded dramatically, and it took on new areas of work, such as improving the standards of police services in post-communist countries. Following Mongolia’s entry in 2012, the OSCE now has 57 participating states. It has a headquarters and secretariat in Vienna, where one of its three institutions, the Representative on Freedom of the Media, is also based. The other institutions are the High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM - in The Hague) and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR - in Warsaw – which among other things conducts election monitoring in participating states).

At various stages, the OSCE has had missions in 20 states (including Kosovo); it still has ‘field operations’ in 12 countries. These vary in size and mandate. In 2000, the mission in Kosovo, one of the largest, had more than 2,500 international and locally-employed staff and (among other things) was responsible for training the Kosovo police service. The OSCE Assistance Group to Chechnya, which operated from 1995 to 2002, only had six international staff, but was responsible for helping to broker the Khasavyurt accord between the Russian and Chechen authorities, which ended the first Chechen war (1994-1996).

But the OSCE’s temporarily successful peace-making in Chechnya also created resentment in parts of the Russian establishment. For Vladimir Putin, the OSCE had become too focussed on human rights, at the expense of security and economic questions; and by concentrating its operations in post-communist states it had divided Europe into Western ‘subjects’ and Eastern ‘objects’. Russia blocked the final declaration of the OSCE ministerial council meeting of November 2000, the first after Putin became president. During the second Chechen war, launched by Putin, the Assistance Group to Chechnya was prevented from carrying out its mission and shut down. In 2002, it encouraged Belarus to close the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Minsk, which worked to improve the human rights situation in the country. After Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, Moscow ensured that the OSCE mission in Georgia also shut down. Although Russia did not block the deployment of an OSCE monitoring mission in Ukraine after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it prevented the mission from operating in Crimea and subsequently hindered its work in Russian-occupied parts of the eastern Donbas region. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the mission had to be evacuated; the *de facto* authorities in occupied Ukraine later imprisoned some of its local staff.

## Who is to blame?

The OSCE has become the forgotten organisation in Europe's security architecture, and Russia bears primary responsibility for that. Over his 25 years in office, Putin has violated all ten Helsinki principles and many other OSCE commitments, including on military transparency. Russia has progressively made it harder for the OSCE to scrutinise events in Russia, for example by refusing to allow OSCE monitoring of Russian elections, and has squeezed the OSCE budget by threatening to veto necessary increases. In his [speech](#) to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Putin attacked the transformation of the OSCE into "a vulgar instrument designed to promote the foreign policy interests of one or a group of countries". He rejected the 1991 assertion that human rights were a legitimate concern for all participating states, reverting to the position that the OSCE's efforts to promote human rights and democracy constituted interference in internal affairs.

The OSCE is hamstrung by the fact that, with few exceptions, decisions can only be taken by consensus, and there are no means to compel a participating state to comply with its obligations. There are mechanisms to allow groups of states to appoint an expert rapporteur to investigate "a particularly serious threat to the fulfilment" of OSCE human rights commitments; and one or more states may request another state to explain unusual military activity, or to accept an inspection of a defined area of its territory where suspect military activity is taking place. But in recent years, Russia has refused to engage with rapporteurs investigating human rights violations in occupied areas of Ukraine, or to allow inspections of military activity.

The West, however, and especially the Europeans, have done less than they could have done to show that they value the organisation. When the Russians accuse the OSCE of double standards, they are not entirely wrong. Western intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was morally justifiable, but hardly respected the Helsinki principles. When tensions arose in the post-communist space, Western countries were keen to get the OSCE involved in conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction; when they arose in Western Europe, they kept it out. For example, the UK and Ireland worked together and with other EU member-states to exclude any OSCE role in relation to Northern Ireland, even though in some cases the expertise of the OSCE institutions might have been useful. While the UK and US were keen on sending OSCE election observers to former Soviet states and ensuring that they got to see as much as possible of every stage of the electoral process, their own legislation made it difficult or impossible for observers to get similar levels of access. And above all, as the EU enlarged, it shielded candidates as well as member-states from OSCE scrutiny other than election monitoring. However specious Russian arguments about the human rights of Russian-speaking minorities in Estonia and Latvia were, the EU's support for the closure of the OSCE missions in the two countries in 2001 fed Russia's narrative that the OSCE treated some countries more leniently than others.

## What is to be done?

The near-term prognosis for the OSCE is poor. Its last ministerial council meeting, in Malta in December 2024, could agree nothing of substance – only the appointments of four senior officials and the date and location of its next meeting.

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to close it down, or to consign the Final Act to the archives. Eventually, Russia's war on Ukraine will come to an end and peace of some sort will return to Europe. At that point, the Helsinki Final Act's ten principles should again become minimum standards for states to meet internally

and in their relations with each other. Wary adversaries may see the benefits of military confidence-building measures – though with fewer loopholes than their predecessors. Most of the economic provisions of the Final Act are obsolete when participating states are all more or less market economies, but co-operation in science and environmental issues is worthwhile, even between adversaries. Likewise, repressive measures against Soviet citizens married to Westerners may no longer be a concern, but issues like family reunification and access to information are. As with the replacement of the League of Nations by the United Nations at the end of the Second World War, new security arrangements for Europe would be better for incorporating the parts of the Final Act and other elements of the OSCE that have shown their value, while discarding those that have contributed to the current situation.

With the end of the Cold War, Western states got used to the idea that the OSCE was a tool they could use to tackle problems in post-communist states, with the increasingly grudging acquiescence of the countries concerned, while keeping the organisation out of their own affairs. But the Final Act was negotiated between hostile blocs (with the help of neutral and non-aligned countries), as a way of regulating adversarial relations, and for its first 25 years it did that successfully. European security is in a worse state now than it was in 1975, but it is unlikely to stay that way forever. If the Helsinki process no longer exists by the time Russia and the West are looking for ways to manage their conflicts, it will be necessary to invent something very like it instead.

**Ian Bond is deputy director of the Centre for European Reform.**