



The History of the OSCE From Its Founding to the Present Day

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October 7, 2015

It is a pleasure to be here at the College of William & Mary – the second oldest college in the United States. Thank you to the Reves Center for International Studies for inviting me to join you today.

Before getting into the substance of this lecture – how the OSCE has evolved since the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975 and providing a look to the future – I'll provide an outline of the OSCE, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Helsinki Final Act, the founding document of the Organization. You will also hear about my experience with, what at that time was the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), and then became the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I will conclude with a look at the Parliamentary Assembly, where I have served as its Secretary General for the past 20 years, and highlight what we are doing to help shape the future of the OSCE.

The OSCE today is the world's largest regional security organization, bridging differences and building trust between 57 participating States while representing the full spectrum of political and economic differences that exist from, as we like to say, Vancouver to Vladivostok. Its four institutions include: the OSCE Secretariat in Vienna (which provides operational support to the Organization), the Parliamentary Assembly in Copenhagen, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in Warsaw, High Commissioner on National Minorities in the Hague, and the Representative on Freedom of the Media in Vienna.

Working alongside these institutions are a number of OSCE field operations in South-East Europe, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These missions are established at the invitation of the respective host countries, and their mandates are agreed by consensus by the participating States. Together these institutions and operations work to implement the OSCE's comprehensive view of security that covers three so called 'dimensions': the politico-military; the economic and environmental; and the human.

This results in our involvement in everything from security issues such as conflict prevention, to fostering economic development, ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources, and promoting the full respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms. A very broad mandate.

At the Parliamentary Assembly we occupy a unique position within the OSCE's framework, providing a link between the governmental side of the OSCE and the people in the OSCE area through the elected members of parliaments of the 57 participating States. Together the parliamentarians in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly represent more than a billion people in the OSCE area, working to ensure that the Organization's values are brought back to their home parliaments and working to make sure democratic accountability is brought to the OSCE.

The Helsinki Final Act was signed in 1975 and was the founding document of the CSCE which evolved to become the OSCE of today. It was a pioneering agreement signed to ease Cold War tensions and erase the dividing lines between East and West. The significance of the Helsinki Final Act lay in the introduction of a new security concept. Previously, security was almost exclusively defined in relation to the external security of states, inter-state relations and military threats. The Helsinki agreement attached politico-military security to two additional dimensions: the economic-environmental and the human. This was an unprecedented departure given that, amidst sustained militarized hostility between the Soviet Union and the West,

human rights and fundamental freedoms had never been considered as genuine security issues – or at least as integral to the concept of security.

My involvement with the process began in 1972, three years before the signing of the Helsinki Final Act as the leader of an American delegation to the All-European Youth Security Conference in Dipoli, Finland. It was at Dipoli that the talks that resulted in the Helsinki Final Act began and its three foundations agreed – politico-security, economic and environmental, and human.

The context of the negotiations leading to the Helsinki Agreement was framed by two demands, one Soviet and one Western. The Soviets wanted recognition of the post-WW2 borders in Europe. In fact, they had been trying to get such a conference going since the 1950s to do this but did not want the United States or Canada to be included.

The second demand was the desire by the West to reduce tensions, further economic co-operation and improve the human rights situation for those living in the USSR and Warsaw Pact Countries. Peter Schlotter, professor of political science at the University of Heidelberg, described it well. In his words, “the basis of the CSCE accords was a trade-off: The Western states complied with the desire of the Soviet Union and its allies for recognition – political and under international law – of the post-war territorial status quo. In return, the West sought to bind Soviet foreign policy to norms and rules.”

It is easy, with the perspective of 40 years, to think how pragmatic and sensible such an agreement was. However, I remember at the time, the reaction to the Helsinki Act in the United States was extraordinarily negative, particularly from the Eastern European communities. One major American newspaper ran a headline which said “Jerry, Don’t Go!” when President Ford left to Helsinki for the signing. The initial perception of the Helsinki Summit, at least in the United States, was that we were selling out Eastern Europe and accepting Soviet hegemony in the region. It is easy to forget with the passage of time, selective memory, and institutionalization of the

OSCE and its structures just how controversial and new the ideals behind the Helsinki Final Act were at the time.

But we – those of us involved at the time – knew at the time that it was a groundbreaking agreement, introducing a security concept that was both innovative and comprehensive. In an era in which security was defined solely in the politico-military context, the tying of economic-environmental issues and human rights to the definition of security was an unprecedented departure and the level of unease it created reflected those concerns.

One of the key elements that was agreed in the negotiations was that everyone would publish all of the details of the Helsinki Final Act. Of course, it was a little difficult to get the *New York Times* or somebody to publish this document but the State Department found ways to publish it, and in the Warsaw Pact countries, citizens read this thing and thought: ‘hey this is good, I can go visit my aunt in West Germany. It says here for family re-unification purposes I can do this and that I can receive Western publications.’ So they began asking their government to fulfil the promises made to them, because in those days when the word came from the top you could do something, they could take it seriously. Citizens groups began to pop up in all these different countries – the Helsinki Monitoring Committee in Moscow, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, Solidarity in Poland and other citizens groups began to try to advocate the fulfillment of those promises in their own countries.

Of course, we all know what that eventually led to, and eventually the Berlin Wall came down and Germany was unified. President Reagan, Mikhail Gorbachev and British Prime Minister Thatcher often get the credit for the end of the Cold War, but the Helsinki Final Act had a lot to do with that, because that started the process. It gave guidelines on not only how governments would react to each other but for the first time human rights was put on the agenda of international discussion, and you could ask questions about how governments treated their own citizens, so it was no

longer ‘none of your business.’ With the Helsinki Final Act, it was something that gave the right to ask other governments how they were fulfilling those promises.

This development of grass roots human rights groups was crucial – from our perspective – for the CSCE follow-up meeting in Belgrade in 1977 to which I went as one of the leaders of the U.S. delegation, and which included members of my staff at the U.S. Helsinki Commission, which was created to follow up on the implementation of the Helsinki Final Act.

The Belgrade follow-up meeting was crucial for keeping the CSCE on track and most important, agreeing on another follow up meeting within two or three years. The Soviets entered Belgrade with the aim to agree a cut off point for the Helsinki Follow-Up Process. They had their border recognition and wanted to stop the inconveniences of the human rights agreements. We went in with the opposite attitude insisting that the Helsinki final Act was fine the way it was, it just needed to be fully implemented.

I knew we had a strong negotiating position – I remember saying ‘the Soviets have taken credit for all this – the Final Act is a great Brezhnevian accomplishment. The Helsinki Final Act was published in all their newspapers, in every country in the Warsaw Pact so they cannot walk out on this.’ We really pushed commitment to human rights and, much to the horror of many diplomats on all sides, we named names and countries that were violating the Helsinki Principles. We were saying ‘Why are you putting these people in jail?’ ‘Why did you shut down this newspaper?’ ‘You promised you would do these things and you didn’t.’ It was a very acrimonious exchange, but it was keeping them honest, keeping their feet to the fire and continued asking the question about how they kept the promises they made in Helsinki.

Establishing the principle of follow-up meetings in Belgrade created the conditions for the Helsinki Process to continue and take root, with another follow-up meeting in Madrid in 1983 and another in Vienna in 1986. The ideals agreed at Helsinki contributed in a major way to the end of the Cold War. The end of the Cold War then

led to a phase of institutionalization. A development signified by the name change itself, from the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe with the Paris Charter in 1990. One of the results of the Paris Charter was the creation of the Parliamentary Assembly, formalized in 1992.

The Future/Helsinki +40

So that was a run through of the OSCE to its current form. Now for something on the present and the future. U.S. President Gerald Ford said, when he signed the Helsinki Accords in 1975, “History will judge this Conference not by what we say here today, but by what we do tomorrow – not by the promises we make, but by the promises we keep.”

I have largely presented a positive assessment of the development of the OSCE over the years. However, Ford’s words of caution were perceptive. Forty years after the Helsinki Final Act was signed, we are still facing problems, crises and threats. The mechanisms developed over the years have not stopped conflict in our region. The OSCE did not prevent conflict between Russia and Georgia in 2008. It has not solved the frozen conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh or Transdniestria. The ongoing tragedy in Ukraine is testament to the ever-present potential for conflict in our region. It is fair to ask – what is the point of this Organization? Is it equipped to deal with the challenges of the post-Cold War world? The last 40 years have undoubtedly provided cynics with many reasons to be uncertain.

I know a lot of you will be studying organizations and structures such as the OSCE and probably sometimes question if they are aware of their deficiencies or are willing to change and reform to become better. This 40th anniversary year has provided the catalyst for such reflection and the Parliamentary Assembly in particular has seized this moment to see how the Organization can improve in the future and remain valid and active for another 40 years.

At the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly we launched the Helsinki +40 project to take stock of where the Organization currently stands, exploring possible new tools and methods of moving forward with a particular focus on the role of parliamentary diplomacy in general. We believe a self-critical Organization is a healthy Organization, and it is with this philosophy that we approached the project. Through a series of seminars in Moscow Washington, Stockholm, Copenhagen and Belgrade we consulted with distinguished experts, diplomats, academics, students, negotiators, CSCE/OSCE veterans and the most experienced OSCE PA parliamentarians to exchange views, share history and suggest changes.

Questions posed included: What should be done to overcome the dividing lines and sclerosis that have emerged stronger than ever in the Organization over the past 20 years? How to make the participating States live up to their commitments and account for transgression of the OSCE's founding principles? And, in general, what mechanisms need to be developed to make the OSCE's soft power a little harder and to prevent the Organization's 40th anniversary from becoming a 'final act' for the Helsinki Final Act?

As a result we produced, what I think, is quite a remarkable document of suggestions for OSCE reform. The final report can be read in full on the website, but the key areas of change identified involve practical steps such as the need to fully use existing mechanisms in areas such as arms control and disarmament and the need for quicker reaction mechanisms during times of crisis. The slowness of our response to Ukraine has highlighted this deficiency.

At a structural level we have identified that the institutionalization of the OSCE I mentioned earlier has reached a point of limiting the effectiveness of the Organization. The closed door Permanent Council meetings – the Permanent Council is the main decision-making body of the Organization - in Vienna leads to a lack of transparency and accountability for the Organization, and the OSCE PA has repeatedly recommended that closed-door meetings be open to the public and the

press. Furthermore, the decision-making process itself needs to change. At the moment a consensus is needed for even minor decisions, and as I'm sure you can imagine, getting consensus from 57 States, all with different priorities and competing interests is next to impossible. The need to change this is prominent in the report and something the PA has been advocating for years. Indeed, the OSCE in Vienna is simply what I call a bureaucracy that refuses to die. Vienna needs to be used as a forum to hold governments accountable in the court of public opinion openly and decisively. To stop pushing for this would defeat the whole purpose of the Helsinki Final Act in the first place.

One thing we must continue, and one of the aspects of our work I am most proud of, is election observation. The commitment to observe elections was made in 1990, and this is an area the Parliamentary Assembly can play an important role, because parliamentarians know about elections; they live and die by elections; they understand when an election is unfair; they understand when an election is being stolen. They see it and feel it instinctively, so they can be good judges and can be objective because they have references with which to compare and contrast. That the Parliamentary Assembly has grown as an Organization to support such observation missions has been a real achievement of the OSCE in the post-Cold War world.

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As a final word, I would like to reflect once more on the Helsinki Final Act. Despite all that has occurred since, good and bad, it is important to remember that by pledging to remove barriers to economic and scientific exchanges, co-operation was enabled in a very real and pragmatic way. The Helsinki Final Act established modes of collaboration for commercial exchanges and industrial development, co-operation in higher education, student exchanges and joint scientific research projects were also stipulated. And today, in this increasingly globalized world, where many of you have probably either studied or are planning to study abroad, we can fully see the advantages of this forward-looking decision.

For those who may be pessimistic about the state of international relations today, there is always some inspiration to be found in the fact that even within the deeply polarized context of the Cold War, countries of the communist East and capitalist West – with fundamentally opposing views on politics and economics – were able to agree to such ideals.

Thank you.