



The Helsinki Final Act: A Critical Moment in Cold War Diplomacy

Farshid Imani ^{1,*}

1- Ph.D. student in International Relations, Florida International University. Email: fiman001@fiu.edu

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

This research paper delves into the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975. It highlights the impact of these events on both the dynamics of the Cold War and debates surrounding human rights. The Helsinki Final Act, although not a treaty, played a crucial role in improving relations between the Communist bloc and Western nations. It set in motion what is known as the "Helsinki process," a series of review meetings to ensure that states adhered to human rights and humanitarian principles. The paper examines how leaders such as U.S. Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev strategically used the Helsinki Accords as tools for reform and how this process contributed to the end of the Cold War. It also explores the varied reactions and interpretations of the Accords in Eastern Europe and in Western countries, emphasizing their role in promoting dialogue, diplomacy, and transnational activism, as well as their indirect influence on political change across Eastern Europe. Finally, it uses international relations theories, especially neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism, to critically evaluate the significance of the Helsinki Accords as evidence of the power of engagement and norms, while also engaging realist and materialist critiques and highlighting the continuing relevance of the Helsinki process in contemporary geopolitical discourse.

Keywords: Helsinki Final Act, Cold War, CSCE, Human Rights, Neoliberal Institutionalism, Constructivism.

1- Introduction

During the Cold War, there was an ideological contest over political freedom, economic systems, and human rights. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) emerged from a central aim: to improve relations between the Communist bloc and the West. The Helsinki Final Act was the culmination of CSCE discussions and set the stage for multilateral negotiations and cooperation among European states and North America. Although it was not a traditional, legally binding treaty, the Act's provisions, especially Basket Three on human contacts and humanitarian issues, were extremely significant and strategically important. In the immediate aftermath, Western European CSCE participants used these rules to advocate for greater openness in Eastern Europe, paving the way for transformative changes in the broader human rights landscape [1,2]. For example, Hungary's gradual loosening of travel restrictions illustrated the tangible impact of the Helsinki Final Act. This policy shift was a pivotal moment that allowed more Hungarian citizens to travel and interact with the West, fostering an exchange of ideas and sowing the seeds for further political openness. The public response was one of cautious optimism, as individuals recognized the potential for increased freedom, which fueled further demands for reform.

The Act also initiated the "Helsinki process," a series of review meetings in cities such as Belgrade, Madrid, and Vienna, which played a vital role in monitoring state behaviour and maintaining pressure to implement the commitments [3]. By supporting institutions such as the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the "Helsinki Commission") and Helsinki Watch, a group of politicians, diplomats, human rights activists, journalists, and international NGOs promoted the Act's humanitarian provisions and translated them into ongoing diplomatic and societal practices [2]. A notable example of civil society operationalizing the treaty's language is Helsinki Watch's role in mobilizing grassroots activism [4]. For instance, Sarah Mendelson, a prominent member, emphasized in an interview how their campaigns turned human rights from a theoretical concept into a tool for real-world change, fostering awareness and inspiring local advocacy [2]. Their efforts

made it clear how norms could travel from conference halls to the streets, empowering citizens and creating bottom-up pressure for reform.

U.S. leaders such as Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan embraced the Helsinki Final Act's potential as a strategic tool, integrating human rights into U.S. foreign policy and using its language to criticize Eastern Bloc practices. Despite being a non-binding accord, the Act's provisions created quasi-legal expectations that influenced state behavior. This phenomenon can be linked to the concept of 'soft law,' which refers to instruments that, while lacking formal legal status, still exert significant influence in shaping international norms and compliance [5]. On the Soviet side, Gorbachev's reforms were shaped in part by the normative and institutional environment the Act helped create. Compared to non-European détente initiatives, such as the thawing relations between the U.S. and China during the Nixon administration, the Helsinki process uniquely intertwined human rights discourse with political strategy, providing transferable lessons for global diplomacy. Together, these developments make Helsinki an important case for thinking about how institutions, norms, and power interact in international politics.

2- Background

Since 1954, the Soviet Union had been eager to reach an agreement that would officially recognize post-World War II borders in Central and Eastern Europe [6]. Soviet leaders believed such recognition would secure their control of the region over the long term, while many Western governments resisted giving formal legitimacy to these territorial arrangements [7]. For instance, throughout the Cold War, the United States accepted de facto Soviet control of the Baltic states but refused to recognize the USSR's de jure sovereignty over them. This struggle for border recognition in 1975 was not merely about territorial lines but represented a broader contest for geopolitical dominance and security, shaping the foundation for what would later become pivotal international agreements in Europe [8].

The tides began to shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s as Western Europe sought a more integrated continent, and countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada started to see potential benefits in a European security conference. Initially, the United States was reluctant to participate, due in part to concerns about being sidelined, but it joined once the Soviets agreed to include both the U.S. and Canada [2,9].

Negotiations formally started in 1972, and after three years of talks, the Helsinki Final Act was signed by 35 countries from Europe and North America on 1 August 1975. The agreement's most important points included its emphasis on human rights and its encouragement of cultural and human contacts across the East-West divide. While the human rights commitments were largely aspirational, follow-up meetings like those in Madrid and Vienna were intended to provide mechanisms for reviewing compliance, highlighting how talk aimed to translate into enforcement [10]. At the same time, by addressing the critical Soviet concern over border recognition, the CSCE became a major diplomatic event that helped to reframe European security and laid the groundwork for political and social changes over the following decade [2,11,12].

Post-accord reactions were mixed. Many Soviet citizens and officials trivialized the event, viewing the accords as non-binding and as a diplomatic victory that legitimized existing borders [7]. In Western countries, opinion was divided. Some critics saw Helsinki as a failure that conceded too much to Moscow [13]. For example, a 1977 telegram from the U.S. Embassy in the Soviet Union reported that TASS depicted the Accords' Western critics as "enemies of détente" and accused them of waging a "fierce political and ideological struggle against the fundamentals of the [Helsinki] Final Act," poisoning American public opinion with anti-Soviet propaganda year after year [14]. In contrast, within the United States, differing opinions within the National Security Council and Congress influenced public sentiment. Certain members viewed the stabilization of European borders as a strategic necessity, while others regarded it as potentially undermining U.S. geopolitical interests [7]. A declassified memo from the era reveals that the divisive reaction was not merely a result of Soviet media influence but also a reflection of contentious domestic debates [15].

Others were more hopeful. In a 1983 Vatican-related cable, Cardinal Casaroli described the Helsinki process as "most useful," emphasizing that it created "objective words" and standards to which Eastern European totalitarian regimes could be held accountable. At the same time, he cautioned that human rights advocacy needed to be balanced with the overarching goal of avoiding war and preventing the eruption of conflicts that the West might not be willing or able to support [14].

The Accords' foundational principles, especially regarding border respect and non-interference, were interpreted differently in East and West. The Soviets viewed them primarily as protection against Western interference, whereas the West saw them as tools to guard against potential Soviet aggression and to insert human rights norms into the East-West agenda [7]. Western leaders such as President Gerald Ford believed the

Accords could introduce a new phase of European cooperation and détente [16]. This raises an intriguing question: Did the dissident networks and their diffusion of norms matter more than Gorbachev's own leadership in bringing about these changes? Over time, the Helsinki Final Act spurred an 'international Helsinki network' composed of Eastern bloc dissidents, Western NGOs, and U.S. governmental structures. This network influenced Gorbachev's reforms and contributed to the downfall of Soviet communism [2]. While the 'Helsinki effect,' as explored by Daniel Thomas, highlighted the power of norms and international commitments, other scholars like Snyder focused on elite calculation, emphasizing the role of individual leaders and domestic politics [1,2,17].

The Helsinki Accords thus stand as a testament to the power of diplomacy and dialogue. By fostering an environment in which states paid increased attention to human rights and institutionalized communication, they laid the groundwork for a Europe that strives, despite enduring complexities, for peace and mutual understanding [1]. In today's context, the Accords' legacy can be seen in ongoing challenges such as the Russian actions in Crimea and the geopolitical shifts within an enlarging European Union. These issues underscore the continuing need for diplomatic engagement and dialogue, offering lessons that remain pertinent in addressing contemporary security dilemmas.

3- The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)

What began as a Soviet proposal in 1954 to confirm post-war borders evolved into a broad diplomatic framework by the mid-1970s [18]. In the aftermath of Stalin's death in 1953 and the ensuing power shifts, Moscow sought to bolster its legitimacy and influence in a rapidly transforming geopolitical landscape [19]. While the initial Soviet intent was to diminish NATO's legitimacy and reduce U.S. influence, the CSCE gradually transformed into a platform that addressed wider European security and cooperation concerns. Political elites and the media did not pay serious attention to the idea until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when a growing desire to ease East-West tensions led Western European states to revisit the proposal [20].

The preparatory phase around 1972 in Finland reflected the Western goal of bridging the ideological gap between the blocs [21]. Western leaders, especially within NATO and the European Community, emphasized human rights, environmental cooperation, and the free flow of people and information. These objectives sharply contrasted with everyday life in the Eastern bloc, where restrictions were severe. For instance, publications critical of the Soviet regime, like the samizdat literature, were banned, and travel outside the bloc was heavily restricted [7]. The inclusion of the U.S. and Canada countered Soviet efforts to limit the conference to Europe alone and ensured that North American security interests would also shape the agenda [22,2].

Henry Kissinger, the U.S. Secretary of State, initially dismissed the CSCE as largely symbolic, citing a memorandum where he likened it to a 'talk shop'. However, as negotiations progressed, the importance of the CSCE became clearer to the U.S. strategic interests. By 1973, deliberations had transitioned to Geneva, and topics were grouped into 'baskets.' An internal memo from Kissinger's office noted, 'The CSCE provides a unique opportunity to engage in broader dialogue on European security,' marking a shift from his initial skepticism. The Soviets, seeking a swift conclusion and formal recognition of their borders, pushed for a narrow agenda. Persistent Western advocacy, however, expanded the scope to include human rights, freer movement, and information flows. Despite Soviet reluctance, Moscow was committed to the CSCE's success and even pursued bilateral talks with Washington to accelerate agreement. Within the Soviet bloc, states such as Romania used the CSCE to seek protection from potential Soviet interventions [7].

The eventual culmination of these efforts was the Helsinki Final Act of 1975. By addressing questions of political boundaries, military cooperation, trade, and human contacts in a single framework, it symbolized a significant shift in East-West relations. Yet interpretations varied: the Soviet Union emphasized state sovereignty and non-interference, while Western states stressed human contacts and freedom of movement. The CSCE's framework and the commitments embedded in the Act created an institutional basis for ongoing review and the gradual easing of tensions between East and West [2].

4- Key Provisions of the Helsinki Accords

The Helsinki Accords were structured around issue groupings known as "baskets." Each basket addressed different dimensions of interstate relations and aimed to balance the interests of the Western and Eastern blocs [2]. This framework, which continues to influence today's multilateral negotiations, highlights the enduring importance of systematic, issue-based diplomacy in managing international relations. Much like recent international dialogues addressing climate change and global security, the baskets offer a structured approach to fostering cooperation in a divided world.

Basket One. Basket One was foundational. It laid down ten guiding principles for interstate relations, including the inviolability of frontiers, the territorial integrity of states, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and non-intervention. Two principles became especially significant: Principle Six, which focuses on non-intervention in internal affairs, and Principle Seven, which emphasizes respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Basket One also introduced confidence-building measures (CBMs), such as advance notification of major military exercises, designed to enhance transparency and predictability among states [1,2].

Basket Two shifted the focus from political-military issues to economic, scientific, technological, and environmental cooperation. It was premised on the idea that economic interdependence could foster peace. The provisions promoted business contacts, industrial cooperation, improved transportation networks, and collaboration on scientific and environmental challenges, thereby seeking to narrow the economic gap between East and West [2,9]. One notable initiative that exemplified Basket Two's ambitions was the series of natural-gas pipeline deals in the 1980s, which created significant trade links across the Iron Curtain and showcased the pursuit of mutual benefits through economic collaboration [23]. These efforts illustrated how economic partnerships could transcend political divides and facilitate a broader dialogue between East and West.

Basket Three, largely driven by Western negotiators, aimed at reducing the social and cultural isolation of Eastern European societies. By encouraging family reunifications, travel, bi-national marriages, and cultural exchanges, it sought to strengthen interpersonal connections across the Iron Curtain. One poignant example involved a Hungarian family, separated for over a decade, who were reunited in Vienna thanks to the new policies. This reconnection of family members not only marked a personal triumph but also underscored the human impact of the Accords, illustrating how diplomatic efforts tangibly improved lives. The basket also covered broader humanitarian issues: improved working conditions for journalists, greater educational cooperation, and a freer flow of information [2,9].

Basket Four. Basket Four was procedural and focused on implementation. It established a system of regular review meetings in cities such as Belgrade, Madrid, and Vienna to assess progress and hold states accountable for their commitments. In practice, these follow-up meetings became key venues where governments, activists, and NGOs could raise human rights concerns and test how far the Helsinki language could be pushed [2,11].

The Helsinki Accords were not simply a diplomatic document but a vision grounded in the principles of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights [24]. While the Accords drew on universal ideals, Cold War political realities meant that states interpreted them through their own strategic lenses. Western governments pushed hard on Basket Three provisions, while Eastern governments often treated human rights language as potentially intrusive [2]. Nonetheless, by structuring discussions through these baskets, the CSCE provided a roadmap for engagement and cooperation in a fractured international system [25]. The significance of the Helsinki Final Act lies not only in its specific provisions but in its broader vision of a cooperative, peaceful, and interconnected Europe. However, the normative legacy of these Accords is enduring but fragile. The aspirational language of the Accords contrasts sharply with the challenges faced by today's OSCE, underscoring the need to continually strive for the cooperative ideals they set forth. As we advance, policymakers and citizens alike must consider whether the framework established decades ago still serves as a guiding star for European security in an increasingly complex global landscape [2,11].

5- Theoretical Perspectives on the Helsinki Final Act

While the preceding sections describe the origins, provisions, and political impacts of the Helsinki Final Act, international relations theory provides additional tools for understanding why and how this apparently non-binding agreement mattered. The Act can be interpreted through multiple lenses: neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, constructivism, and debates over norms versus material power.

5.1. Neorealist and Neoliberal Institutional Interpretations

From a neorealist perspective, the Helsinki Final Act is understood as a product of power balances and detente among great powers. Realists see the conference as a strategic bargain where the Soviet Union sought recognition of post-war borders and security guarantees, while Western states aimed to minimize conflict risks, manage military competition, and stabilize the European status quo. Hence, the Accords served as an instrument to control rivalry and cement a relatively favorable distribution of power, rather than achieving a transformative normative breakthrough [26,27].

In contrast, neoliberals view the Helsinki Final Act through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, emphasizing the role of institutions and regimes in fostering cooperation within an anarchic international system. Although the Final Act lacked legal binding force, neoliberals see it functioning as a regime that molded expectations, reduced uncertainties, and lowered transaction costs by establishing regular forums for dialogue

and information sharing. [28] The CSCE review meetings, CBMs, and reporting practices facilitated mutual monitoring among states and offered structured venues for airing grievances. [29] As such, neoliberals contend that the Helsinki framework, akin to other international regimes, although formally weak, exerted considerable influence over state behavior through information dissemination, standard-setting, and creating reputational costs for non-compliance [26,27].

5.2. Constructivism, Norm Diffusion, and Human Rights

Constructivist approaches delve deeper by showing that the Helsinki Final Act not only mirrored existing interests but also redefined the identities and normative landscape of participating states. Principle Seven notably shifted human rights from being seen as purely domestic to an international focus. Once the Soviet bloc supported language about rights and freedoms, it became challenging to hide human rights practices behind non-interference [10].

Constructivist scholars of norm diffusion argue that international norms often emerge, cascade, and become internalized through processes of persuasion, socialization, and shaming [26,27]. The Helsinki process fits this pattern. Initially, human rights norms emerged as a contested value during international negotiations. Subsequently, this led to the cascade stage, where these norms began to gain traction and wider acceptance, ultimately transforming into a more widely accepted international standard. Over time, this contributed to shifts in national identities, especially in parts of Eastern Europe, where rulers increasingly struggled to justify domestic repression in the face of international commitments they had publicly endorsed. Finally, during the internalization stage, the Helsinki language provided a powerful discursive resource for dissidents, churches, intellectuals, and reformers who could now demand that their governments live up to the promises made in an international forum. In signing Helsinki, regimes unwittingly armed their own citizens with a universal moral [30].

5.3. Transnational Advocacy Networks and the Boomerang Pattern

Another major contribution of constructivist and transnational relations scholarship is the concept of transnational advocacy networks (TANs) and the "boomerang pattern." This model describes a sequence where domestic groups unable to influence their own government reach out to international allies, such as NGOs, foreign states, or international organizations, who then exert pressure on the domestic government from the outside. This external pressure effectively sends the initial demands "boomeranging" back into the domestic arena [31,26]. This pattern remains relevant today, as seen in the global climate youth movements. These movements mobilize international support to pressure governments worldwide to act on climate change, reflecting the enduring utility and explanatory power of the boomerang model [31]. The Helsinki process exemplifies this sequence: domestic activists formed networks, these networks relayed their message internationally, and external actors in turn pressured governments to adhere to human rights standards [31].

The Helsinki process created fertile ground for such mechanisms. International NGOs and domestic activists not only formed organizations such as the Moscow Helsinki Group, Charter 77 in Czechoslovakia, and the Workers' Defense Committee (KOR) in Poland, but they also strategically framed their issues to attract international attention and support. These groups adeptly highlighted the universality of their causes, portraying their struggles as part of a broader human rights movement, thus resonating with international audiences [2]. They monitored compliance with the Final Act, documented abuses, and sent information to Western governments and NGOs [2]. Western actors, in turn, used Helsinki language in parliamentary debates, diplomatic exchanges, and public campaigns to pressure Eastern Bloc governments [32].

Transnational advocacy networks became crucial agents of political change in Eastern Europe. They put human rights violations on the international agenda, challenged official narratives, and provided protection and legitimacy to domestic dissidents [33]. The U.S. Helsinki Commission, for example, relied heavily on information smuggled out by Eastern European and Soviet activists, which it then used to hold hearings, issue reports, and push the U.S. executive branch to incorporate human rights concerns into East-West diplomacy [27]. These efforts not only pressured governments to change policy rhetoric but also pushed them towards genuine internalization of human rights norms, shifting from mere compliance to integrating these principles into state identity and governance practices [34]. In addition to the East-West dynamics, examples like the Southern-based NGO, Third World Network, and the UN Human Rights Council demonstrate the diverse actors involved in these networks. These organizations emphasize the global reach and influence of the boomerang pattern, showing how it extends beyond regional confines to engage a wide array of international allies [35]. This progression underscores the broader constructivist argument that norms, once external pressures, can evolve into integral components of the state's policy and identity.

5.4. Norm Diffusion, Domestic Change, and the "Helsinki Effect"

The Helsinki process comprised several interacting mechanisms that shaped domestic politics in Eastern Europe. Norm diffusion is central. After 1975, human rights and fundamental freedoms acquired a new status as shared European norms. Although Communist regimes initially saw such provisions as unacceptable intrusions into internal affairs, continued advocacy by Western states and Eastern dissidents led to the gradual acceptance of human rights as integral to European identity [36]. Beyond rhetoric, however, these norms influenced national preferences by reshaping the priorities of domestic actors such as policymakers, civil activists, and intellectuals. For instance, a prominent policymaker in Hungary shifted their stance as they began to embrace the language of human rights, gradually aligning national policies with international expectations. These shifts illustrate the tangible impact of Helsinki norms on preference formation within Eastern European societies [36].

The diffusion of these norms was reinforced through the CSCE's follow-up conferences in Belgrade (1977), Madrid (1980–83), and Vienna (1986–89). Belgrade introduced public reporting mechanisms, which marked the beginning of structured monitoring by external actors [37]. During the Madrid conference, the scope was further expanded to include wider access for NGOs, allowing them to participate more actively in the human rights discourse [38]. By the time of the Vienna conference, the process had gained renewed energy, culminating in the establishment of dense networks of activists and officials dedicated to fostering these norms [20]. Institutionally, the formation of the Moscow Helsinki Group and the U.S. Helsinki Commission in 1976, and later the U.S. Helsinki Watch Committee (established in 1978), paved the way for the creation of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF) in 1982 with a broader mandate [39,32].

Daniel Thomas has described the “Helsinki effect” as the process by which international norms and institutions contributed to the demise of communism by empowering domestic and transnational actors who used Helsinki’s language to delegitimize authoritarian rule [34]. These developments show how a formally non-binding agreement can, through repeated interaction and norm entrepreneurship, generate real political consequences [40]. The power of words, cemented in the Helsinki Accords, fundamentally challenged authoritarian structures, demonstrating that diplomatic dialogue indeed toppled walls on the ground [36].

5.5. Competing Explanations: Material Power and Realist Critiques

While many scholars emphasize the transformative role of norms and institutions, realist and materialist approaches offer important critiques. Some argue that the Helsinki Final Act was far less important than the Soviet Union’s material decline and the structural shifts in the global economy [34]. This realist-constructivist tension highlights significant theoretical stakes in international relations (IR) by challenging our understanding of how power dynamics and normative changes coexist within global politics. Resolving this tension is essential for broader IR theory, as it helps illuminate ongoing debates about the balance between structure and agency in shaping international outcomes.

Brooks and Wohlforth, for example, highlight extensive evidence of Soviet economic decline, including falling growth rates from the 1960s onward, severe defence burdens (an estimated 15–20 percent of GDP in the early 1980s), and the USSR’s isolation from emerging patterns of global production, foreign direct investment, and inter-firm alliances [41]. In their view, these material pressures were decisive in compelling Soviet leaders to reorient foreign policy and accept an end to the Cold War. Helsinki, in this interpretation, did not play an independent causal role; it was largely an epiphenomenon of deeper structural shifts.

Other scholars challenge the notion that the Helsinki Final Act was a Western triumph or a key factor in ending the Cold War. They argue that the agreement effectively accepted the division of Europe, recognized Soviet conquests (including the annexation of the Baltic states), and did little in practice to secure human rights in the Eastern bloc. From this perspective, Helsinki is seen as a diplomatic success for Moscow and a defeat or at least a risky gamble for the West. Critics emphasize that domestic opposition in the United States was strong at the time and argue that Western policymakers did not fully appreciate any long-term benefits of the conference [42]. However, some declassified memos from that period reveal that U.S. officials did weigh the strategic advantages of fostering normative gains through Helsinki. An example includes a memo indicating that, despite domestic opposition, there was a belief within the administration that promoting human rights norms could eventually undermine Soviet control in Eastern Europe [43,44,42].

These realist and revisionist critiques force a more balanced assessment of the Helsinki process. They underscore that normative changes occurred within, and were constrained by, a broader environment of shifting power, economic crisis, and domestic political calculations. The economic crisis led to a scarcity of resources, weakening the Soviet Union’s ability to maintain its empire and making it more open to negotiations that invoked human rights norms to secure economic aid and stability [41,11]. Similarly, Western actors, facing their own economic pressures, saw the promotion of human rights as a strategic tool to destabilize Soviet influence in

Eastern Europe [2]. This convergence of economic conditions and strategic objectives helped forge new avenues for norm change and international collaboration [45].

6- Helsinki as Process Rather than Event

Finally, a growing literature emphasizes that the Helsinki Final Act should be understood less as a single diplomatic event and more as a long-term process [46]. This process combined institutional innovation, norm diffusion, transnational activism, and material change [26]. It helped reorder European security thinking away from a narrow focus on military capabilities toward a broader understanding that includes political systems, human rights, and the rule of law [47].

In this view, the significance of Helsinki lies not only in its contribution to the end of the Cold War but also in its role in transforming the international normative environment, establishing institutional mechanisms for ongoing review, and encouraging new forms of cooperation. It was both product and driver of the changing European order [42,34].

7- Implications and Responses to the Helsinki Accords

The CSCE and the Helsinki Accords had a profound impact on political change and human rights discourse in Europe. During this period, the global stage was marked by a complex geopolitical chess game, with superpowers navigating between confrontation and détente. Within this context, the Helsinki Accords represented a significant normative push that contrasted with the existing expectations of easing tensions. Discussions of individual rights under the rule of law became more prevalent, and Soviet representatives sometimes showed a surprising willingness to address Western proposals, signaling potential shifts in their approach to human rights and political freedoms [1,11]. This Soviet flexibility was startling as it suggested a departure from their rigid stance, thereby reflecting the intricate strategies playing out in the Cold War dynamics.

Responses among Eastern European states varied. Romania's decision to distance itself from aspects of the Helsinki process inadvertently accelerated CSCE's evolution, as other actors used the forums more assertively to spotlight human rights abuses [48]. Over time, the agenda shifted from simply documenting violations to promoting political structures and legal frameworks to prevent them.

Hungary's choice to leverage its Helsinki obligations to open its border with Austria in 1989 had dramatic consequences, facilitating a mass exodus from East Germany. This movement undermined the East German regime and hastened its collapse. In Ukraine, the creation of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group in 1976 signaled a direct attempt to monitor Soviet compliance with human rights commitments and to embed Helsinki norms within a broader struggle for national and civic rights [1, 11]. A member of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group once remarked, 'We saw the Accords as a beacon of hope, a tool to inspire change within our communities' [1]. This statement underscores the profound impact of the Helsinki norms in empowering local activism and mobilizing dissident movements across Eastern Europe.

8- Long-term Effects and Legacy of the Helsinki Accords

The peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s are often considered among the most significant results of the Helsinki process. They demonstrated that entrenched political divisions and authoritarian regimes could be eroded without large-scale military confrontation, a central aspiration of the Helsinki vision [1]. The ideas enshrined in the Helsinki texts found their way into the streets of Prague and Leipzig, as demonstrators invoked the principles of human rights and political openness, creating a powerful network effect across borders. As a result, human rights activists gained important roles in post-Communist governments, especially in countries such as Czechoslovakia [49].

The Accords also reshaped the way security was conceptualized in Europe. Security came to be understood not only in military terms but also in relation to domestic political systems, respect for human rights, and adherence to the rule of law. This shift revealed the limits of traditional Realpolitik and highlighted the value of diplomacy, cooperation, and normative commitments [7]. Over time, the CSCE evolved into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). This more permanent institution continues to address security, democracy, and human rights issues throughout the region [21].

9- Controversies and Criticisms of the Helsinki Accords

Like most major political negotiations, the Helsinki Accords generated significant controversies and criticisms. Some observers viewed the CSCE as a Soviet tool to solidify Europe's division and legitimize the post-war territorial order. From this angle, the recognition of existing borders and the failure to achieve immediate

human rights improvements in the Eastern bloc were seen as evidence that Helsinki was, at best, a risky gamble and, at worst, a Western defeat [1,17,44]. However, not all voices shared this critical outlook. Several Western diplomats and scholars argued that the Accords laid the groundwork for dialogue and engagement, creating a platform for addressing human rights issues, albeit gradually. They saw Helsinki as a pivotal step toward détente and a necessary instrument for future transformation, emphasizing its potential to encourage openness and reform across the Eastern bloc [40].

Scepticism also surrounded Gorbachev's proposal for a Helsinki summit in the late 1980s. Many critics suspected it was a tactical move to manage the rapidly changing political situation in Eastern Europe rather than a genuine commitment to the Accords' human rights norms. These scepticisms highlighted a significant paradox within the Helsinki process: Gorbachev's intentions might have been rooted in strategic maneuvering, yet these very actions inadvertently empowered civil society movements across the region. This empowerment showcased how tactical aims can sometimes yield unexpected normative dividends [34]. Moreover, debates about the future of military alliances like NATO and the Warsaw Pact were closely linked to the CSCE's credibility: the dissolution or preservation of these alliances would shape how the Helsinki framework evolved, amplifying the complexities and unintended consequences of power politics in this era. Nonetheless, as the positive effects of the process became clearer—especially the role of Helsinki language in legitimizing dissident activism and peaceful transitions—many early criticisms lost much of their force. The debates, however, remain important reminders that institutional and normative innovations are always embedded in complex power politics.

Conclusion

The Helsinki Accords, officially titled the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, represent a pivotal chapter in Cold War diplomatic history. Emerging from the CSCE, they left a lasting imprint on European politics and the wider international system, with effects continuing long after the Cold War ended.

At their core, the Accords forged a bridge of understanding between rival blocs, creating a rare moment of détente amidst intense ideological conflict. Their three main baskets—political and military principles, economic and environmental cooperation, and human contacts and human rights—addressed a wide spectrum of issues, with Basket Three playing a particularly significant role in elevating human rights and individual freedoms within international diplomacy.

The indirect political effects of Helsinki in Eastern Europe were profound. Romania's stance, Hungary's border opening, and the growth of dissident networks in Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere all reveal how the Accords were used creatively by domestic actors. The largely peaceful revolutions that followed showcased the potential for eroding entrenched divisions without resorting to large-scale military force.

From a theoretical perspective, Helsinki is best understood as a complex process rather than a single event. Realist approaches underline material decline and power shifts that constrained Soviet choices. Neoliberal institutionalism emphasizes how even non-binding regimes can structure expectations, provide information, and reduce uncertainty. Constructivist and transnational perspectives highlight norm diffusion, identity change, and the crucial role of advocacy networks and boomerang patterns. Together, these approaches suggest that the Helsinki process worked through the interplay of material pressures, institutional arrangements, and evolving norms.

Important challenges remain for scholars seeking to measure the precise causal impact of Helsinki. Isolating the effect of ideas and norms from material conditions is inherently difficult. Cross-national variation further complicates analysis: 35 states signed the Final Act, and the "Helsinki effect" was not uniform. Factors such as pre-existing intellectual traditions, degrees of societal openness, and regime vulnerability to external pressure all shaped outcomes. Countries like Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Soviet Union experienced stronger mobilization around Helsinki norms than did Bulgaria, Romania, or East Germany.

Even with these complexities, it is difficult to reduce the Helsinki Final Act to either a mere concession to Soviet power or a single cause of the Cold War's end. Instead, it is more accurate to see it as an extraordinary process that helped create a new European security order, established novel norms and institutions, and increased cross-bloc interactions. From a realist angle, the Act contributed to stabilizing the balance of power and managing détente. From neoliberal institutionalist and constructivist perspectives, it created frameworks for emphasizing human rights and human contacts, lowered the costs of cooperation and monitoring, and empowered NGOs and activists. All of this unfolded through a shared normative language that gradually delegitimized authoritarian rule.

The Helsinki Final Act demonstrates how diplomacy, institutions, and norms can shape international politics in ways that interact with, but are not reducible to, material power. Its legacy continues to inform debates about European security, human rights, and the possibilities and limits of cooperative security orders.

References

- [1] Mastny V. The Helsinki process and the reintegration of Europe, 1986–1991: Analysis and documentation. Institute for East–West Security Studies; 1992.
- [2] Snyder SB. Human rights activism and the end of the Cold War: A transnational history of the Helsinki network. *Human Rights Quarterly*; 33:1–28, 2011. doi:10.1353/hrq.2011.0001
- [3] U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Belgrade followup meeting to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe: A report and appraisal. 1978. Available from: <https://www.csce.gov/publications/belgrade-followup-meeting-conference-security-and-cooperation/>
- [4] U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Profiles: Helsinki Monitors. 1979 Dec 10. Available from: <https://www.csce.gov/publications/profiles-helsinki-monitors/>
- [5] Boyle A. Soft law in international law-making. In: Evans MD, editor. *International law*. 6th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2024. Available from: <https://academic.oup.com/oxford-law-pro/book/59948/chapter/512813542>
- [6] Naimark N. The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944–1953. In: Leffler MP, Westad OA, editors. *The Cambridge history of the Cold War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2010. p.175–197. doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521837194.010
- [7] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Samizdat. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; 2025. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/technology/samizdat>
- [8] Le Monde. Helsinki Accords. *Le Monde*. 2024 Dec 8. Available from: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2024/12/09/finland-s-president-stubb-europe-must-choose-between-yalta-moment-and-helsinki-moment_6735782_4.html
- [9] Plokhy S. *Chernobyl: The history of a nuclear catastrophe*. New York (NY): Basic Books; 2018.
- [10] Weston BH. Human rights and the Helsinki process. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; 2026. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/human-rights/Human-rights-and-the-Helsinki-process>
- [11] Plokhy S. *The last empire: The final days of the Soviet Union*. New York (NY): Basic Books; 2014.
- [12] Badalassi N, Snyder SB, editors. *The CSCE and the end of the Cold War: Diplomacy, societies and human rights, 1972–1990*. Berghahn Books; 2018. doi:10.1515/9781789200270
- [13] Laber J. Domestic opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. *Journal of American Studies*; 14(2):179–194, 1980. doi:10.1017/S0021875800010190
- [14] Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS). Official publication of the U.S. Department of State; n.d.
- [15] Central Intelligence Agency. Soviet dissent and its repression since the 1975 Helsinki Accords (Intelligence assessment). 1985 Jul 10. Available from: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t00591r000300330003-3>
- [16] Luecke M. A commitment to human rights. Ford Presidential Library and Museum. 2025 Aug 1. Available from: <https://ford.blogs.archives.gov/2025/08/01/a-commitment-to-human-rights/>
- [17] Horvath R. Rethinking the “Helsinki effect”: International networks and the end of the Cold War [book review]. *Diplomatic History*; 37(3):633–635, 2013.
- [18] Molotov VM. Molotov’s proposal that the USSR join NATO. 1954 Mar. Wilson Center Digital Archive. Available from: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/molotovs-proposal-the-ussr-join-nato-march-1954>
- [19] Pfaff W. Russia—the quest for legitimacy. *The New Yorker*. 1983 Jul 18. Available from: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1983/07/25/russia-the-quest-for-legitimacy>
- [20] U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Helsinki process and the OSCE. n.d. Available from: <https://www.csce.gov/helsinki-process-and-osce/> (Accessed 2026 Feb 7).
- [21] OSCE Secretariat. CSCE becomes OSCE. 1995 Jan 2. Available from: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/52527>
- [22] Lekarenko O. The role of the USA in the preparation and holding of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. *USA & Canada: Economics*; (6):31–47, 2024. doi:10.31857/S2686673024060036
- [23] Graham B. Bonn, Moscow sign major gas agreement. *The Washington Post*. 1981 Nov 20. Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/11/21/bonn-moscow-sign-major-gas-agreement/2b3cec6f-bc7e-48bd-896b-8075267ca0b8/>

- [24] Cassese A. The approach of the Helsinki declaration to human rights. *Vanderbilt Journal of Transnational Law*; 13(2):275–291, 1980. Available from: <https://scholarship.law.vanderbilt.edu/vjtl/vol13/iss2/3/>
- [25] Toda Peace Institute. Adapting co-operative security: The OSCE's challenges and opportunities in a fragmented world (Report No. 218). 2021. Available from: <https://toda.org/policy-briefs-and-resources/policy-briefs/report-218-full-text.html>
- [26] Finnemore M, Sikkink K. International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*; 52(4):887–917, 1998. doi:10.1162/002081898550689
- [27] Risse T, Ropp SC, Sikkink K, editors. *The power of human rights: International norms and domestic change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1999.
- [28] Fazendeiro BT, Freire MR, Nascimento D. Why the OSCE endures: The Helsinki Final Act at 50 in illiberal central Asia. *International Affairs*; 2026. doi:10.1093/ia/iaf267
- [29] Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Confidence building in the OSCE. 2012 Sep 24. Available from: <https://www.osce.org/secretariat/106440>
- [30] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. Helsinki Accords. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*; 2026. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Helsinki-Accords>
- [31] Keck ME, Sikkink K. *Activists beyond borders: Advocacy networks in international politics*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press; 1998.
- [32] Slezkine P. From Helsinki to Human Rights Watch: How an American Cold War monitoring group became an international human rights institution. *Humanity*; 5(3):345–370, 2014.
- [33] Bal S. Human rights norms diffusion through transnational advocacy networks: LGBT+ rights as a case. *International Relations*; 18(71):109–127, 2021. doi:10.33458/uidergisi.947584
- [34] Thomas DC. *The Helsinki effect: International norms, human rights, and the demise of communism*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 2001. Available from: <https://search.worldcat.org/title/45715865>
- [35] Pallas C. Inverting the boomerang: Examining the legitimacy of North–South–North networks in transnational advocacy. *Global Networks*; 17(2):281–299, 2017. doi:10.1111/glob.12129
- [36] Risse-Kappen T. The Helsinki Accords and political change in Eastern Europe. *International Organization*; 53:477–508, 1999. doi:10.1162/002081899550907
- [37] Moring T. Helsinki process. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. n.d. Available from: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Helsinki-process> (Accessed 2026 Feb 7).
- [38] Helsinki Monitoring Group. On the Madrid conference on security and co-operation in Europe. National Security Archive. 1980 Summer. Available from: <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/23787-helsinki-monitoring-group-members-moscow-helsinki-group-exile-madrid-conference>
- [39] Kenney P. *A carnival of revolution: Central Europe 1989*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 2002.
- [40] Risse-Kappen T. The Helsinki Accords and political change in Eastern Europe. *International Organization*; 49:211–236, 1995. doi:10.1017/S0020818300042120
- [41] Brooks SG, Wohlforth WC. Power, globalization, and the end of the Cold War: Reevaluating a landmark case for ideas. *International Security*; 25(3):5–53, 2000.
- [42] Snyder SB. “Jerry, don’t go”: Domestic opposition to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act. *Journal of American Studies*; 44(1):67–81, 2010.
- [43] Boel B. Who helped the Soviet Bloc dissidents? Western subversive encounters beyond the Iron Curtain during the Cold War: Narratives, approaches, puzzles. *Cold War History*. Epub ahead of print, 2024.
- [44] Davy R. Helsinki myths: Setting the record straight on the Final Act of the CSCE, 1975. *Cold War History*; 9(1):1–22, 2009.
- [45] Colbourn S. Review of *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, by Morgan MC. *Political Science Quarterly*; 134(4):753–754, 2019. doi:10.1002/polq.12964
- [46] Morgan MC. *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the transformation of the Cold War*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 2018.
- [47] OSCE Troika. Statement of the OSCE Troika on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. 2025 Jul 31. Available from: <https://www.osce.org/chairpersonship/595855>
- [48] Stanciu C. Romania, the CSCE and the legacy of World War II. *European Review of History*; 25(3):393–410, 2018. doi:10.1080/13507486.2018.1480190

- [49] Kopecek L. Dealing with the communist past: Its role in the disintegration of the Czech Civic Forum and in the emergence of the Civic Democratic Party. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*; 43(2):199–208, 2010. doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2010.04.002.