BACK TO SQUARE ONE: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE HELSINKI AGREEMENTS REFLECTIONS FROM THE EIGHTH INTERNATIONAL LEONIDAS DONSKIS MEMORIAL CONFERENCE

NERINGA GALIŠANSKYTĖ

Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development, Lithuania

ISSN 1392-0588 (spausdintas)
ISSN 2335-8769 (internetinis)
https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8769.84.13
2025. 84

For the eighth time in a row, the International Leonidas Donskis Memorial Conference[1] took place in Lithuania. This time, in the premises of ISM University of Management and Economics (hereinafter ISM), which were chosen for a reason – Prof. Donskis was not only an important figure as Professor and Senate Member at Vytautas Magnus University (VMU), but also the Pro-Rector of Science at ISM. Much to the spirit of Leonidas Donskis who was never limited in his career to one academic institution, the conference venue at ISM was chosen for the specific purpose of creating a common space for open discussions regarding the Helsinki Agreements fifty years after their signing, uniting experts from Vilnius University, University of Turku, University of North Carolina, University of Ottawa, and many other institutions.

The Helsinki Agreements, signed in 1975 by 35 countries including the U.S., Canada, the Soviet Union, and most of Europe, were meant to ease Cold War tensions. They recognized post–World War II borders, promoted economic and scientific cooperation, and committed states to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms. While not legally binding, the accords became a powerful tool for dissidents and civil society movements in Eastern Europe to hold their governments accountable. Over time, the framework established by the Helsinki process evolved into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) – a permanent institution created to uphold these same principles through dialogue, monitoring, and conflict prevention. And yet, half a century later, we witness a significant deterioration of the Agreements and complete invisibility of the OSCE,

[1] Hereby we express gratitude and acknowledgement to interns – Anastasiia Puha, Christian Chukwudubem Elesia and Tomas Tamulevičius – of Andrei Sakharov Research Center for Democratic Development, for preparing the abstracts of the presentations which served as the basis of this report.

raising several highly important questions that the conference speakers aimed to answer: what is left of them 50 years later? Are they outdated to protect the current and future generations? Is it possible to revive the Helsinki spirit in times of rising authoritarianism and a lack of moral imagination?

WHAT IS LEFT OF THE AGREEMENTS NOWADAYS?

Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs **Gabija Grigaitė-Daugirdė** opened the conference by acknowledging the uncomfortable truth that the values of the Helsinki Accords are under direct attack. The same principles that once helped secure Lithuania's independence now face severe erosion through Russia's aggression, disinformation campaigns, and contempt for international law. Despite the collapse of many mechanisms that once upheld dialogue and trust, she emphasized that the historical foundations of European democracy – the rule of law and the human dimension of the Helsinki Final Act – remain the moral compass of Europe's sovereignty.

In **Michael Cotey Morgan's** view, "very little in practice is left" of Helsinki today: although Russia hasn't formally renounced the Final Act, its actions (changing borders by force, denying the freedom to choose alliances, constraining ideas and rights) effectively reject its principles. Still, the Final Act retains value for liberal democracies as a touchstone of constructive legitimacy – and the lesson should not be to "wind back the clock," but to apply the Helsinki method: define the future we want and articulate updated principles to fit today's realities.

Rachel Denber reflected on the enduring legacy of human rights within this framework. She described the present in stark terms: today's Russia is not merely a shadow of the Soviet Union but, in some ways, an even more dangerous reincarnation. Its weaponization of repression, both domestically and abroad, exemplifies a modern form of autocracy that has adapted to the digital age. Yet Denber cautioned against despair. The human rights movement, she argued, "was born in dictatorship and has survived tyranny," and even amid the collapse of civil society in Russia and Belarus, it continues to evolve and endure. Similar ideas were also expressed by **Anna Chernova**, who noted that the young generation feels betrayed by international law, yet emphasized how much worse the situation would have been if the processes and mechanisms created by the Helsinki Agreements had not existed at all. She highlighted the key role of the OSCE in promoting inclusion and democratic processes, primarily through election observation, but noted that the consensus rule undermines the OSCE's mission.

Roy Allison warned that Moscow's downgrading of territorial integrity challenges not only the Agreements but also the UN Charter itself. This means a

collapse of faith among Western States in the form of codification, institutions, and confidence in security-building. **Bradley Reynolds** observed that the Cold War principle of mutual deterrence – built on a level of predictability – has lost relevance as predictability is now nonexistent and contemporary security is defined by rapid escalation and the need to arm Ukraine.

Jonathan Boyd reflected on how the Helsinki Agreements' third basket on human rights pierced isolation and created 'hooks for accountability' in the 1970s, but now struggles to reach the same goals. Nevertheless, he argued that the provisions can still be used as tools to document abuses and prepare conditions for accountability, for example, to track deported Ukrainian children. "However long the abuses last, the human rights regime will endure, ready to judge. The third basket keeps liberal norms alive even in a hostile environment, and its task is to ensure that they continue to reach those who are persisting," Boyd said.

CAN (AND SHOULD) WE REVIVE THE HELSINKI SPIRIT?

The question of whether the "Helsinki spirit" can and should be revived was central to the discussions, especially given the conference's innovative format, which placed a 'young challenger' on each discussion panel to question established experts by bringing the perspective of future generations. One of the young challengers, **Brigita Dyburytė,** explained that some of the freedoms laid out in the Helsinki Final Act may have gotten distorted as times changed. For example, free access to information did not necessarily create freer societies, as the broad application of the Internet enabled the weaponization of disinformation, fueling radicalization and a shift towards far-right narratives. Another challenger, **Maka Berulava**, spoke about how she and future generations will carry collective trauma due to the disrespect for the values they were raised on and the temporality of peace. Meanwhile, **Bohdan Polovynko** questioned the usefulness of declarations such as the Final Act, given that states have become unpredictable due to reliance on a handful of people for decision-making, and violations of human rights and territorial integrity continued after declarations condemning that had been signed.

Thus, speakers explored what could replace – or meaningfully renew – the Helsinki framework in today's fractured geopolitical order. **Konstantin Kuhle** argued that hybrid warfare has become the defining feature of contemporary conflict, merging military and non-military tactics to blur the line between war and peace. Russia's use of disinformation, cyberattacks, and manipulation of diasporas, he said, directly violates the "decalogue" of Helsinki principles. His suggestion to counter it was resilience: societies must strengthen their capacity to withstand aggression "without succumbing to a climate of war."

Panel discussions highlighted that while traditional arms control and confidence-building measures have weakened, they remain indispensable foundations for any future security order. **Minna Alander** argued for a return to practical arms control, not for disarmament's sake, but to re-establish channels of communication and avoid inadvertent escalation. **Craig Oliphant** stressed that the OSCE still has value through some of its mechanisms, but survival will depend on renewed political will in European capitals. **Jonathan Cohen** reminded participants that mediation and peacebuilding must include marginalized voices, youth, and those living through trauma. Using the "light at the end of the tunnel" metaphor, he argued that the future lies in making the "tunnel brighter" rather than merely searching for its end – through inclusive diplomacy, human resilience, and moral imagination.

Robert van Voren traced recent attempts to rekindle the relevance of the Helsinki Final Act through the international program *Reviving the Helsinki Spirit*, conceived in response to Russia's annexation of South Ossetia and subsequent border changes in Georgia. The initiative aimed to reconnect younger generations – those who never experienced communism – with the humanist and cooperative ideals of 1975. The project was repeatedly disrupted by shifting global realities. Still, the effort itself reflects how profoundly the world has changed: issues such as climate change and pandemics now intersect with security and diplomacy in ways the original signatories could scarcely have imagined.

Philosopher and publicist **Paulius Gritėnas** approached the question through the lens of Leonidas Donskis' philosophy of *moral imagination*. He argued that reviving the Helsinki spirit depends less on political procedure than on moral creativity – the ability to envision alternatives when "unimaginability" has become normalized. For Donskis, moral imagination was the essence of all ethical and political choice; its absence leads to the legitimization of "liquid evil," the belief that "there is no alternative." Gritėnas proposed that the Helsinki Agreements themselves were an exercise in moral imagination: their abstract legal language created space for human rights narratives and acts of civil disobedience that gave meaning to freedom. To rekindle the Helsinki spirit, societies must therefore train empathy, sustain intellectual friendship, and resist the paralysis of unimaginability. "There is always an alternative," he argued –"it is only our failure to imagine that hides it from view."

Echoing the ideas of Leonidas Donskis, Michael Cotey Morgan emphasized the necessity of creativity and of knowing how to address current realities in ways that work in favor of human rights and security. **John Packer** reminded the audience that "the light is there – it entails effort and determination," urging renewed solidarity grounded in dignity and cooperation.

HOPEFUL PESSIMISM OR STARK REALITY?

The final discussions of the Donskis Conference oscillated between the sober recognition of a fractured international order and a cautious belief that moral agency still matters. The participants did not indulge in nostalgia for 1975, nor did they deny the disillusionment of the present. Instead, they approached the Helsinki legacy as a mirror reflecting both the endurance and the fragility of the values it once enshrined. As several speakers noted, pessimism today seems almost inevitable: the international institutions born from the Helsinki process appear paralyzed, dialogue is weaponized, and faith in a rules-based order has eroded.

The tone of "hopeful pessimism" that emerged was, therefore, not a contradiction but a call for clarity. It acknowledged that peace and cooperation cannot be restored by returning to the frameworks of the past, but must be reimagined through courage, empathy, and the moral discipline to defend shared principles even when success seems remote. As Michael Cotey Morgan reminded, the task is not to recreate the world of Helsinki but to apply its method – to define the world we wish to build and the rules that might sustain it.

In this light, "hopeful pessimism" becomes a productive stance: one that accepts the gravity of the moment without surrendering to cynicism and recognizes that even in darkness, moral conviction remains a form of resistance. As the conference closed, John Packer's words echoed as both a warning and a promise: "The light is there – it entails effort and determination." Whether that light marks the end of the tunnel or merely its next bend will depend, as Leonidas Donskis often reminded, on our ability to imagine – and act upon – the alternatives we refuse to stop believing in.