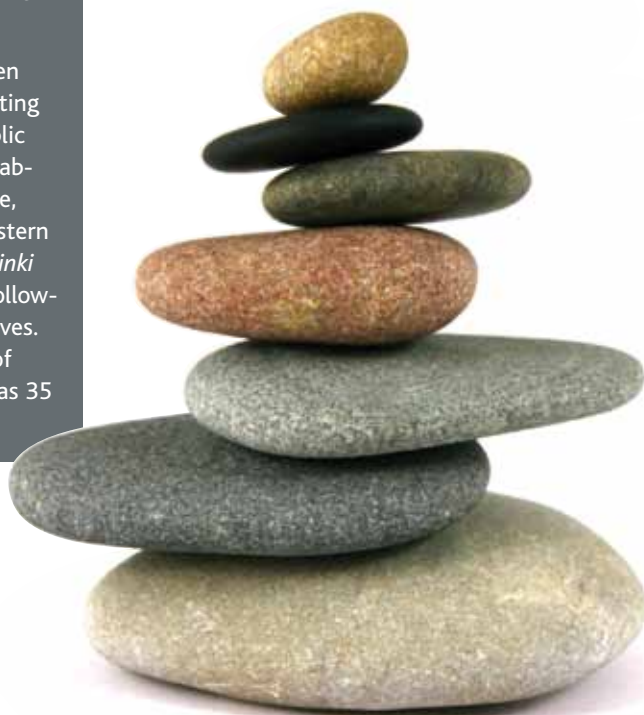


## Helsinki Committees

The 1975 *Helsinki Final Act* recognized respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as one of the ten basic principles guiding relations between participating States. It affirmed "the right of the individual to know and act upon his rights and duties in this field."

The *Helsinki Final Act*, or the *Helsinki Accords*, as the agreement was often called, was published in full by the main newspapers of the 35 participating States, informing the people of what their leaders had signed up to. Public acceptance of human rights and fundamental freedoms inspired the establishment of Helsinki Committees in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which were soon supported by similar groups in North America and Western Europe. It was dangerous at the time to report on violations of the *Helsinki Final Act*. In spite of the danger, their reports were tabled at the CSCE Follow-up meetings in the 1970s and 1980s and brought changes to people's lives. Violations of human rights continue across the OSCE region. The work of the Helsinki Committees and related groups is as relevant today as it was 35 years ago.



## The Moscow Helsinki Group

### *The seed from which the Helsinki movement grew*

by Ludmilla Alexeeva

A public group to monitor compliance with the *Helsinki Accords* in the USSR, the Moscow Helsinki Group (MHG), was established in Moscow on 12 May 1976 on the basis of the third "basket" of the *Helsinki Accords*, which contains the humanitarian articles of those *Accords*. These articles included basic human rights, whose observance members of the human rights movement in the USSR had been seeking for some ten years. Yuri Orlov, the founder and first chairman of the MHG, envisioned its goal as follows: "The Group will monitor compliance with the humanitarian articles of the *Helsinki Accords* on the territory of the USSR and inform all States that have signed that document along with the Soviet Union of any violations."

The *Helsinki Accords* lay down a compliance monitoring mechanism. Specifically, at annual conferences the heads of all the delegations were to evaluate the observance by all the partner States of the agreements they had signed. We hoped that the information we provided on violations of the humanitarian articles would be examined at these conferences and that the democratic States would demand that the Soviet Union

observe the *Helsinki Accords* in full measure, including the humanitarian articles. Violation of these agreements could have led to the collapse of the *Helsinki Accords*, something the Soviet leadership could not accept. It was very much in the USSR's interest to maintain what was for it an extremely advantageous treaty, considering that the country had been bled dry by lengthy isolation from the rest of the world and by a furious arms race. Monitoring the entire vast territory of the USSR might have seemed an impossible task for the 11 members of the MHG. After all, they were just as disenfranchised as all other Soviet citizens, and the Group's equipment consisted of two old typewriters. On the other hand, the Group did include experienced human rights activists who had by that time gathered a great amount of material on the subjects in question. What is more, foreign radio stations broadcasting to the USSR constantly carried reports on the work of the MHG, and we began to receive information on human rights violations from different ends of the country. We were informed of these matters by activists from the Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Georgian and Armenian national movements.

These reports contained information regarding infringements of the right to the use of one's mother tongue, to education in one's mother tongue, and the like. Religious activists (Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals and Catholics) told us of violations of the right to freedom of religion. Citizens who were not members of any movement informed us of violations of the humanitarian articles of the *Helsinki Accords* that had affected either themselves or those close to them.

Later on, following the MHG model, the Ukrainian and Lithuanian Helsinki Groups were established in November 1976, the Georgian Helsinki Group in January 1977, the Armenian Helsinki Group in April 1977, the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR in December 1976 and the Catholic Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in November 1978. Helsinki committees also sprang up in Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Arrests began in the Ukrainian and Moscow Helsinki Groups in February 1977. One of the first persons to be arrested was the chairman of the MHG, Yuri Orlov. He was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment with hard labour and five years' exile. The Soviet court regarded his activities as anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda with the intention of undermining the Soviet State and social structure. By autumn 1977 more than 50 members of Helsinki groups had been deprived of their freedom. Many were given lengthy prison sentences, and some died before they were released. The media in the USSR's democratic partner countries under the *Helsinki Accords* covered the Helsinki process and the persecution of its participants in the USSR and its satellite States. The public in these countries responded to this persecution by establishing their own Helsinki groups and committees. The establishment of the American Helsinki Group was announced in December 1978. Similar organizations later sprang up in Canada and a number of Western European countries. The goal of all of them was to put a stop to the persecution of their colleagues and exert pressure on their national governments so that they would resolutely demand of the Soviet Union the implementation of the humanitarian articles of the *Helsinki Accords*.

These efforts bore fruit. Beginning with the Madrid conference in October 1980, the democratic participating States began at each conference to unanimously voice these demands. Gradually, observance of the commitments within the third "basket" became one of the main aspects of the Helsinki process. The Vienna conference of 1986 saw the signing of an additional protocol under which the human

rights situation in any country that was a signatory to the *Helsinki Accords* was recognized as a common concern for all partner countries.

In this way, the Moscow Helsinki Group became the seed from which the international Helsinki movement, with its influence on the content of the Helsinki process, was to grow. This was perhaps the first time in the history of diplomacy that public groups played this kind of role in agreements between States: the Soviet Union was charged with violating the humanitarian articles of the *Helsinki Accords* on the basis of documents provided by the Moscow, Ukrainian and Lithuanian Helsinki Groups.

Under pressure from the democratic partner countries, not only the members of the Helsinki groups but also all imprisoned persons convicted under the political articles of the Soviet Criminal Code were released in the USSR in 1987. In 1990 Soviet citizens were granted the right to freely leave the country and return, and the persecution of religious believers ceased.

The experience gained through this close co-operation with non-governmental organizations was reflected in the fact that the OSCE was the first international association of nations to include these organizations in its working process as equal partners. At human dimension conferences, representatives of non-governmental organizations participate on a basis of parity with official representatives of OSCE States and are granted the floor in the same way that they are.

The Moscow Helsinki Group, which at the time of its founding was the only independent public organization in the Soviet Union, today plays a leading role in the Russian human rights community and in the civil society that has evolved in the Russian Federation. The main area of the MHG's work continues to be the monitoring of the human rights situation. Today, however, that monitoring and protection of human rights is carried out not only on the basis of the humanitarian articles of the *Helsinki Accords* but also with the support of the *Constitution of the Russian Federation*, the *European Convention on Human Rights and Freedoms* and other international treaties on human rights signed by the Russian Federation.

Ludmilla Alexeeva was a founding member of the Moscow Helsinki Group and has been its Chairperson since 1996.

# Helsinki voices

Several of the many Helsinki groups active today speak about their work.

“After the signing of the *Helsinki Final Act*, members of the U.S. Congress travelled to the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe and witnessed with their own eyes the urgent need for continual monitoring of its implementation. By the summer of 1976, our country established the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

Our commission continues to monitor OSCE States’ implementation of their commitments. Often we have been the platform for freedom — giving leaders silenced at home the chance to be heard abroad. But the real heroes are the human rights defenders working on the ground to expose abuses as they occur. Unfortunately, 35 years after the *Helsinki Final Act*, in some OSCE countries these modern heroes still work under threat and fear of retaliation. We still have a lot of work to do. The OSCE helps us do that work together. And we’re proud the U.S. Helsinki Commission has been at the leading edge of that effort in many cases.”

— **U.S. Senator Benjamin L. Cardin and U.S. Representative Alcee L. Hastings, Chairmen, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

“Although the world has changed, the *Helsinki Final Act* remains highly relevant for the work of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, founded in 1977. Unfortunately, increasingly so. It is especially two features of the *Helsinki Final Act* that remain important. Firstly, that it was intended to establish a comprehensive framework for peace and stability in Europe. And secondly, that it included human rights and fundamental freedoms in that framework. The fact that some of the OSCE participating States have decided to target human rights defenders as enemies of the state constitutes an enormous setback for the advancement of Helsinki principles. That is why the upcoming OSCE Summit needs to reaffirm in strong language the letter and spirit of the *Helsinki Final Act*.

While the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* gave an authoritative international definition of human rights, the 1975 *Helsinki Final Act* brought those rights to the doorsteps of all CSCE/OSCE countries. For the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the main task remains to bring those rights over that doorstep in order to make them fully operative in all countries of the OSCE area.”

— **Gunnar M. Ekeløve-Slydal, Deputy Secretary General, Norwegian Helsinki Committee**

“Human Rights Watch began in 1978 with the creation of Helsinki Watch, whose purpose was to support the citizens groups established throughout the Soviet bloc to monitor government compliance with the 1975 *Helsinki Accords*. A network of Watch Committees monitored human rights also in the Americas, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and the network adopted the all-inclusive name Human Rights Watch in 1988.

New human rights challenges in the 1990s led to important innovations in the work of Human Rights Watch, including real-time reporting of atrocities and in-depth documentation of cases to press for international prosecutions.

Today, Human Rights Watch works on a broad range of issues worldwide, ranging from domestic violence to terrorism response. Combining its traditional on-the-ground fact-finding with new technologies, such as statistical research, satellite photography and bomb data analysis, and innovative advocacy keeps Human Rights Watch on the cutting edge of promoting respect for human rights worldwide.”

— **Human Rights Watch**

“The Helsinki Committee in Poland is a direct offspring of the European human rights movement, which was inspired by the signing of the *Helsinki Accords*. It was founded as a citizen’s initiative in 1982, and in the early years the activists were forced to work underground, as they had to fear repression from the government.

Nowadays, the Helsinki Committee in Poland is a group of respected individuals making statements on high profile human rights violations of concern. The daily human rights’ work is done by the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, a non-governmental organization with over 40 employees that promotes the protection of human rights in Europe. The main areas of the HFHR’s activity are education in the field of human rights (especially in former Commonwealth of Independent States territory) and different monitoring, advocacy and strategic litigation activities aimed to enhance protection of human rights in Poland.”

— **Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Poland**

“The Albanian Helsinki Committee was founded in 1990 at a time when the totalitarian regime was collapsing. Initially, it was called the Forum for the Protection of Fundamental Human Freedoms and Rights, and it was the first organization of its kind in the history of Albania.

It is the mission of the Albanian Helsinki Committee to contribute to a better respect of human rights and to strengthen the rule of law and human rights in accordance with the *Helsinki Final Act* and its follow-up documents, and with the international legal obligations set by the Council of Europe, the United Nations and the European Union.”

— **Vjollca Meçaj, Executive Director, Albanian Helsinki Committee**

“The Netherlands Helsinki Committee (NHC) was established in 1987, when the prospects for co-operation in Europe on democratization and promotion of human rights became greater. Since then, the NHC and its local partners have carried out dozens of projects on capacity-building of civil society and governmental bodies in Central and Eastern Europe, with a focus on improvement of the rule of law: strategic litigation on human rights (in particular the European Human Rights Convention), prison reform, developing ombudsman services and fighting human trafficking. The NHC founded the journal *Helsinki Monitor* (renamed *Security and Human Rights* in 2008), devoted to human rights, peace and security in the OSCE region. In November 2010, the journal is launching an OSCE weblog at [www.shrblog.org](http://www.shrblog.org). An under-resourced part of the NHC mission is advocacy on the implementation of human dimension and human rights commitments in greater Europe. Plans are to beef up this aspect of the work in the coming years.”

— **Harry Hummel, Executive Director, Netherlands Helsinki Committee**

“The Bulgarian Helsinki Committee was established in 1992 after the fall of communism. Most of the founding members, however, were active in human rights groups already during communism and operated in opposition to the regime. We were inspired by the *Helsinki Final Act*, as well as by the subsequent CSCE commitments. Our organization was founded to monitor the implementation of these commitments, as we strongly believe that this process requires the attentive eyes of non-governmental public watchdogs. Since our foundation we have investigated and reported on a broad range of human rights violations in Bulgaria. We publish annual reports on human rights developments in Bulgaria and raise public awareness on specific human rights problems affecting vulnerable groups in our society. We also take individual cases to adjudicating bodies and participate in the reviews by the United Nations and the Council of Europe of the human rights situation in Bulgaria.”

— **Krassimir Kanev, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee**

“Our Committee started its work in 1994. It’s predecessor, the Yugoslav Helsinki Committee, simply dissolved like Yugoslavia did, and new groups emerged. Especially in the founding phase, the Helsinki principles were of great importance for us and for the other newly established organizations.

During the 1990s, our Committee lived through difficult times. As wars were still raging, our activities focused on refugees, minorities, war crimes, genocide, the intimidation of human rights defenders, and the ethnification of the public sphere.

Today the focus of our work lies on the implementation of laws affecting human rights and on human rights education. Although we have already achieved a lot in Serbia, there is still a long way ahead.”

— **Sonja Biserko, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia**

“The foundation of Helsinki España — Human Dimension was initiated during an OSCE conference in Moscow in 1991. The aim was to promote the OSCE’s human dimension through the education of human rights, fundamental liberties, democracy and the rule of law within the university context.

To carry out its educative work, Helsinki España acts through an International University Network, comprising 140 universities from 53 different countries. Within this network, Helsinki España organizes international university meetings on human rights, offers courses to prepare experts for their participation in peace missions of international organizations, including the OSCE, the United Nations and the European Union. Helsinki España also trains university volunteers to teach human rights sessions in primary and secondary schools.

— **Ana Nieto, Executive President, Helsinki España – Human Dimension**

“The *Helsinki Final Act* with all the related texts enriching it since the 1990s has been the driving force behind many NGOs, including the Greek Helsinki Monitor, in their efforts to help improve democracy in the OSCE countries by securing the respect of all rights of every social group — especially the most vulnerable ones. Moreover, the Helsinki/OSCE process that installed a public dialogue between civil society and states has often helped solve specific human rights problems, as democratic states cannot afford to be embarrassed in such forums. The Greek Helsinki Monitor today focuses on minority rights, including Roma rights, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, freedom of religion and state neutrality towards religions, reports to United Nations and Council of Europe expert bodies and litigation before Greek and international courts.”

— **Panayote Dimitras, Greek Helsinki Monitor**

“The birth of Bridging the Gulf was inspired by the Helsinki process, arising out of the 1975 *Helsinki Final Act*, which emphasized the peaceful co-existence of states, mutual non-interference and the respect for human rights, as well as economic and personal contacts across borders. Our initiative is based on the conviction that peaceful and respectful contacts from outside the region will lessen the tensions in the area and positively influence regional and international co-operation.

We promote and advocate human security, human rights, women’s rights and the development of civil society in the Gulf region. At the same time, the foundation aims to build a bridge between the Gulf region and Europe by establishing platforms for dialogue and exchange and by promoting the understanding of the Gulf region in Europe.”

— **Wilco de Jonge, General Secretary, Bridging the Gulf**

Prepared by Vera Mair, Intern at the OSCE Secretariat’s Press and Public Information Section

# The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly

by Siegfried Wöber

**W**hat can citizens do towards building the united, peaceful and secure Europe, which the CSCE participating States envisaged in the Helsinki Accords? For more than 20 years, peace activists from East and West have worked together for this joint goal, united in a platform called the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly.

The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly was founded in Prague in October 1990. Vaclav Havel, the new President of Czechoslovakia, spoke at the founding assembly, which brought together more than 1,000 people from all over Europe. The decision to create such a network went back to the second half of the 1980s, when members of the Western European peace movement took up contact with opposition groups behind the Iron Curtain and developed the strategy of "détente from below".

From the very beginning, the Assembly focused on regions of tension and possible conflict, with the aim of creating a pan-European civil society. It promoted peace and understanding through citizens' dialogue and diplomacy — providing support and solidarity to groups in difficult and dangerous situations, simultaneously lobbying different governments and international institutions — something that was much more cumbersome before the advent of the Internet.

In the 1990s, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly network was a relatively well-organized body with branches in more than 20 countries, while still retaining the character of a grassroots movement. Its Yugoslav branch was founded in Sarajevo in May 1991. A peace caravan was held in September of that year. Some 40 European activists travelled by bus through Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia, connecting with local anti-war activists. The caravan culminated

in Sarajevo, where a human chain of 10,000 people linked the mosque, the synagogue and the Orthodox and Catholic churches. The ties forged during the visit of the peace caravan were sustained, by and large, throughout the war — a war led "against the values of tolerance, mutual respect and individual autonomy that were the centre-piece of the original eighteenth-century conception of civil society," as one leading Helsinki Citizens' Assembly activist, Mary Kaldor, later wrote.

The Helsinki Citizens' Assembly also became active early on in the South Caucasus. National committees established in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were among the first NGOs in the region. The movement, supported by Assembly members from the West, successfully worked on the liberation of hostages and prisoners of war and on maintaining contacts and building trust between citizens across frontlines. This work is still going on, since the rights of families of missing persons are often neglected and involuntary disappearances continue all over the region. In October 2000, Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Azerbaijan organized the fifth international Assembly in Baku. More than 500 civil society activists from all over the world, including 41 Armenians, of which 12 came from Nagorno-Karabakh, attended. Some of these persons recently created the "Civil Minsk Process".

In the past decade, the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly, chaired by Arzu Abdullayeva from Azerbaijan and Bernard Dreano from France, has undergone various transformations. Some of the assemblies have turned into think-tanks — the South Caucasus Institute of Regional Security in Georgia is an example. The fight against terror and changing foreign aid policies have certainly had an impact. New activities have been launched in the Middle East — in Israel, Palestine and Iran.

Still, the original aims and the eclectic nature of the network remain. Active groups or persons associating themselves with the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly can still be found in Bosnia, Montenegro, Austria, France, the Netherlands, the South Caucasus, Moldova, Poland and Turkey, where the next annual School of International Dialogue and Understanding will take place. Istanbul will also host a 20-year jubilee event in October, to provide time for reflection and space for a generational change. Some might claim the "Helsinki spirit" is gone, but there is still more than enough energy in this movement to keep it alive.

Siegfried Wöber has been involved in the Helsinki movement since 2000. He is a staff member of the OSCE Secretariat's Conflict Prevention Centre in Vienna.

Parents of missing soldiers from Armenia and Azerbaijan, under Georgian and international mediation, who prepared the first joint Armenian-Azeri publication on the topic. Photo: Alexander Russetski

