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OSCE Chairpersonship Event – Resilient Together in a Changing Climate

Side Event Presentation - Helsinki+50 From Below? Building Bottom-Up Approaches for Climate Resilience

Introductory remarks

Hello and thank you all for attending our side event today. I am Bradley Reynolds, board member at Historians without Borders in Finland, an organization that promotes the use of historical knowledge for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. I am also a senior researcher at the University of Turku researching Finland's history in the CSCE.

I am here today to speak on the second dimension and with my colleagues, to offer food for thought on the work of civil society in the second dimension, past and present. Our goal is to consider ways civil society can support the 'comprehensive security model' of the OSCE, which I think we all agree is needed today more than ever. In the words of historian Mary Sarotte, "in tense times when chances of improvement seem remote, sowing the seeds for long-term change is often the smartest strategy."

I am not necessarily an environmental historian, or a natural scientist with an expertise on climate change or the environment. However, as a historian of the CSCE and OSCE, I believe the Helsinki Process has in the past planted these seeds of long-term change and hope for many citizens from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Addressing the climate crises requires immediate action, but I also believe developing resilient societies, of which cooperative climate policy is a key aspect, requires long-term thinking.

Civil society actors' and social activists' ability to continually push for this long-term change is what Jiří Dienstbier, former Czechoslovak dissident turned foreign minister, termed the hidden possibilities in the Helsinki Process.

Using transnational networks to do this was also key. When different social movements either referenced the Helsinki Principles or gained inspiration from the values of the Helsinki Process in the late Cold War period, innovative new transnational connections were fostered. Historian Sarah Snyder termed these the 'Helsinki networks'. Leftist peace activists began to work with Reaganite Eastern European dissidents and Environmental activists began to shape their demands in terms of more general social and political rights. The connection of these diverse social movements, either referencing or inspired by the Helsinki Principles, was termed 'détente, or Helsinki from below'.

In the 1990s, the Helsinki Citizens Assembly was created to further direct these diverse connections, bringing together upward of 700 activists yearly in the early 1990s in what has been termed the first attempt to integrate Europe from below. This came to be termed 'the conscience of Helsinki' as it allowed citizens with a diverse set of interests to utilize the values and principles of the Helsinki Process to demand that their governments remain committed to international agreements such as the Helsinki Final Act, the Charter of Paris, and so on.

While grass roots cooperation and these connections may have dissipated within the framework of the OSCE, the history of these networks offers inspiration for comprehensive security today and how civil society actors can utilize the OSCE and remain the conscience of Helsinki.

This was the premise of the OSCE by All project that I designed, along with Dr. Johanna Ketola, and then implemented at Historians without Borders. This was a pilot project, running from January 2024 until February 2025, to raise interest in Finnish society and among Finnish civil society organizations before and during the Finnish OSCE chairpersonship.

Through the OSCE by All project we attempted to introduce and engage civil society actors, experts, and young people from outside the OSCE bubble. We organized public panel discussions between civil society actors and state officials; motivated students to write policy papers on the OSCE, learning about an institution they knew little about; and most importantly for this side event, organized an international workshop with 20+ civil society representatives working on environmental issues from across the OSCE area, East and West of Vienna. The workshop was titled Environmental security and the OSCE - you may have read the policy recommendation paper that came out of the workshop. If not, I have copies with me up here I can distribute after the event.

In showing the early value of our workshop, the networks created have already led to continued cooperation. With one of the other Finnish NGOs that participated in the workshop, SaferClimate, founded and led by Dr. Rosa Rantanen, we hosted a session on April 22 at the annual Atmospheric and Climate Competency Centre impact week in Helsinki to discuss how scientists can work in different ways to address the climate crisis. Rose is here today, and I think she is a great example of someone who works to connect social scientists and natural scientists in pursuing climate justice. Hopefully we can continue to include her, and other environmental civil society organizations, into the OSCE family.

In concluding my introductory remarks, I would like to remind everyone that the Helsinki Final Act was intended to “create a better life for people” or at least this is what UK Prime Minister Ted Heath said to West German Chancellor Willy Brandt during the original CSCE negotiations.¹

The issues we see as most important for creating a better life have developed since 1975. Environmental issues, while significant in the 1970s and 80s, have become increasingly existential in the 2020s. The environmental movement today is a substantial transnational movement. Addressing climate change before the impacts become irreversible, has become a fundamental, if not the fundamental issue, for a better life for many people around the world.

This idea that the Helsinki Process was intended to offer people a better life has led to numerous unique opportunities for civil society organizations to participate in OSCE discussions here in Vienna. At the same time, including civil society in baskets other than the third basket may not always be the norm. Therefore, in retaining the added value of the OSCE as a premier European security institution that allows direct engagement and cooperation with civil society, we believe that the second dimension may benefit from new areas of civil society participation. The Aarhus centres have been a significant project the OSCE supports, engaging environmental issues with local communities. We are here today to see if there are additional fruitful avenues to develop Helsinki from below in the second dimension, in support of Helsinki from above.

I will now let my colleagues present their work, as they are the real environmental experts. Thank you.

¹ Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).