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Autor: Roulin, Stéphanie / Kunter, Katharina

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Advocating Religious Freedom in the Helsinki Process – World Churches, Non-State Actors and the Challenge of Neutrality

Stéphanie Roulin/Katharina Kunter

The *Helsinki Accords* signed in August 1975 were the result of difficult negotiations begun in 1972 between the countries of Eastern Europe (including the USSR), the United States, Canada and all of Western Europe. They resulted in a declaration of ten principles that were not binding under international law, but the signatory countries undertook to adhere to it in the framework of the *Conference for Cooperation and Security in Europe* (CSCE). The so-called Decalogue was followed by three «baskets» focussing on the political and security dimension (in particular respect for the 1945 borders), the economic and cooperation dimension (in particular scientific exchanges) and finally the human dimension (freedom of travel, family reunification, individual rights and freedoms). Principle VII on Human Rights and Religious Freedom along with basket 3 had an unexpected impact.¹ They enabled the Human Rights and Civil Rights Groups in Eastern Europe (such as Charta 77 in Tchechoslovaquia) to point out infringements of rights and to be relayed to the West by support groups, the Helsinki Watch groups.

Other non-state actors and NGOs also did their share by campaigning for human rights and religious freedom behind the Iron Curtain with missionary initiatives or by starting political debates in the public sphere of their respective countries. This issue focusses on these actors in three neutral States, in order of appearance Switzerland, Sweden and Finland. When the six authors gathered here first discussed this subject, Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine had been raging for nine months.² The *Holy See*, the *World Council of Churches* (WCC) and other global bodies were grappling with their stance of neutrality. Counting the number of Helsinki principles that had been violated,³ it was clear to all that

¹ Cf. for ex. Markku Ruostila in this volume.

² Workshop on Neutral States and Non-State actors and Geopolitics. New research perspectives in view of the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act (1975–2025), University of Fribourg, 11 November 2022.

³ Cf. articles by Katharina Kunter and Massimo Faggioli, respectively 263 and 277–278.

the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE) had failed miserably to resolve the disputes and prevent escalation. Its predecessor, the CSCE, had already proved unsuitable with the Yugoslav conflict of 1991, which was the first test after the end of the Cold War. Yet the OSCE Permanent Council still meets every week in Vienna. And it is one of the few places where Russian and Ukrainian diplomatic representatives have continued to rub shoulders, even after the annexation of Crimea in 2014⁴ and after the Russian attack of 24 February 2022. With its multidimensional approach of collective security and preventive diplomacy, the OSCE should have made NATO obsolete. Instead, Finland and Sweden are now members of NATO. The «brain-dead» decree applied by President Macron to NATO in 2019 now suits the OSCE better than ever.

In this gloomy constellation, the efforts to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Helsinki agreements (1975–2025) may come as a surprise. As far as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is concerned, the injunction to its members to convince their own governments of the importance of the OSCE, appears quite pathetic.⁵ In journals devoted to strategy and international relations, such calls for a revival of the «spirit of Helsinki» have become «a rhetorical *tarte à la crème*»⁶. Strategy specialists have deplored the fact that the OSCE is underused and underestimated.⁷ Historians also have a programme «towards Helsinki 2025», but they adopted a perspective of explanation rather than celebration. The idea was not to commemorate these accords in an instrumental or apologetic sense, but to seize the opportunity of an anniversary to take a fresh look at the past of an institution that has somewhat disappeared from the radar. A number of publications and workshops aimed at revising Helsinki's triumphalist narrative by focussing on players who have received too little attention.⁸ We, members of the informal research network Religion and Cold War – *ReCoNet*, have been looking in particular at the place of the religious factor in the Helsinki process and after.⁹

⁴ Guy Vinet (OSCE international civil from servant 2011–2021), *L'OSCE à l'heure de l'Ukraine*, *Revue Défense Nationale* 851/6, (2022), 136–140. <<https://doi.org/10.3917/rdna.851.0136>>.

⁵ Call for Action Initiative – Helsinki +50 process, 2020. <<http://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/osce-call-for-action/4146-infographic-call-for-action-helsinki-50-process/file>>.

⁶ The expression was used by historian Thomas Fischer during the workshop Neutral States and Non-State actors and Geopolitics (cf. note 2).

⁷ Guy Vinet (cf. note 4). Alexandre Lambert/Thomas Schmidt, *L'OSCE: 30 ans après la fin de la guerre froide, transformation de sa géographie politique et de son espace diplomatique*, *Revue militaire suisse* 2 (2021), 4–11. <<https://doi.org/10.5169/SEALS-977663>>.

⁸ Inspired by the publications such as Nicolas Badalassi/Sarah B. Snyder (eds.), *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War: Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights*, New York 2019, a yearly autumn workshop has been organized by the ReCoNet team since 2020 in Fribourg, Lund and Paris London Salzburg University. We should also mention the conference at the University of Innsbruck on 17–18 November 2022: Andrea Brait/Nina Hechenblaikner (Eds.), *Freedom and Security. The CSCE Follow-up Meeting in Vienna*, Brill (in review).

⁹ ReCoNet has a blog on Hypothèses: <https://reconet.hypotheses.org/>

The studies in this section reveal dynamics such as the growing polarization between those who favoured a confrontational strategy of denunciation centred on the right to practise a religion, and those who favoured dialogue and the defence of freedoms in general.

The first three articles are case studies based on archives that have been little or never explored before. Eva Maurer exposes the underside of a rare religious offensive by the albeit secular *Swiss-Eastern Institute* (in German SOI) of Peter Sager in the mid-1970s. Sager's aim was less to help «persecuted believers» in the East than to create a climate hostile to the left in the context of cantonal and federal elections. Yet he could no longer count on the hitherto unanimous support of Switzerland's anti-communist right, and was abandoned in his own camp. Eric Sidenvall analyses the evolution of the Swedish Pentecostal Slavic Mission (1965–1985), from a vibrant denunciation of the persecuted believers in the East and the recruiting of bible smugglers, to direct linkage with religious congregations in the USSR. Using precious oral testimonies to supplement the various written sources, Markku Ruostila sheds light on the gap between the thoroughly «finlandized» discourse of the Finnish churches and what the conservative in the society and the neo-pietist Evangelicals thought beyond the taboo on human rights violations and the celebration of détente and neutrality.

What the studies have in common is that they investigate the direct or indirect impact of Helsinki on the positioning of local players who interacted with like-minded groups on the national and international level. The years 1974–1975, marked by the final phase of negotiation of the agreements and by the WCC General Assembly in Nairobi, was unsurprisingly a turning point. But the articles show that debates on rights and freedoms in the East are as much, if not more, about the national political and religious context as they are about geopolitical configuration. They also bear witness to the growing need for coherence on the part of those who claim to be neutral and to defend human rights and freedoms. For example, it was longer acceptable to fight only for «persecuted Christians in the East» and to turn a blind eye or minimize the violations against human rights in Pinochet's Chile and in the apartheid regime in South Africa. This led to the highly topical criticism of «double standards». The classic tensions between the options for «aid through information» and «concrete aid» were coupled with the questioning of the purpose of such aid. When information was poorly referenced and presented in a biased way (case of the SOI's brochures on religion), and when an operation of Bible smuggling turned into a fiasco (Slavic Mission 1977), didn't aid do more harm than good?

The last three contributions offer a wider perspective on the global players, namely the *Holy See* and the *World Council of Churches*. Roland Cerny-Werner presents the evolution of the *Holy See's* stance towards the world between the

post-Second World War period under Pius XII and Vatican II under Paul VI. In this pre-Helsinki era, he recalls to what extent the Council was a turning point, especially with the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* on religious freedom which included the secular and atheists for the first time. Through a conceptual analysis of the «engine room» of papal diplomacy, he also seeks to show that the change of course began under Pius XII in the mid-1950s already. The first signs of the openness to the world that culminated in Paul VI's speech to the UN in August 1965 were already apparent. The author points in particular to the negotiations surrounding the pontifical representation at the «International Conference on the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy», which led to the rather unexpected participation of the *Holy See* in the founding of the *International Atomic Energy Agency* in 1957.

Katharina Kunter goes back to the origins of the concept of neutrality in the work for peace and human rights since the Red Cross. She studies the fluctuations on the crest line that has always been that of the Protestant Churches, in particular the WCC during the Cold War. Picking up where Cerny-Werner left off, Massimo Faggioli examines the use of and numerous references to the «spirit of Helsinki» in the discourse of the Vatican Secretariat of State until Pope Francis. After Achille Silvestrini who has to be credited for the 1965 religious freedom declaration, Agostino Casaroli was a key figure in the *Holy See's* participation in the Helsinki negotiations. Faggioli's study recalls that this participation was not self-evident and that it had been bitterly debated in order to overcome the reluctance. If Kunter and Faggioli conclude on an inevitably pessimistic note about the fragile position of the world Churches as peace brokers in the face of present geopolitical challenges, the research group is heading towards Helsinki 2025 with an undiminished historical curiosity. There is much ground to cover to better understand the local and global implications of religious actors and to assess the role of the religious factor in the CSCE/OSCE process.

Stéphanie Roulin/Katharina Kunter