The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How Russia Can Learn From Helsinki (Op-Ed)

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August 19, 2015



The 40th anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe passed almost unnoticed in Russia. Probably because the date falls during the most systemically unstable period in Europe since the declaration was signed.

The Final Act was a large-scale compromise, not so much in terms of concrete details, but in the agenda itself. The Soviet Union got what it initiated the whole process for — confirmation of its post-war European borders and the alignment of forces that arose at the end of World War II.

The 30 years between 1945 and 1975 were the peak of the Russian state's power (in its Soviet form); it rose swiftly to the position of one of Europe's leading states, and then to the status of world superpower with only a single rival. After Helsinki, it became a game of maintaining that position, and one of the pieces in that game was, for example, Afghanistan.

It wasn't a matter of expanding the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, but the start of its

decline. In short, the Soviet leadership correctly sensed (probably instinctively rather than rationally) the moment when they needed to "hold onto their winnings."

The West at that moment had just lived through an internal crisis, caused in part by foreign policy failures. Europe and the U.S. were undergoing a wave of civil rights struggles, the catalyst for which was America's loss in Vietnam, and that of France in Algeria and other colonies, as well as Britain's painful loss of its status as a world power.

The energy of foreign expansion, which had always been one of the main driving forces behind the development of Western civilization, was turned inward, toward the transformation of Western countries' own societies. The unrest of the 1960s was beneficial to the West, leading not to revolution, but to a strengthened social foundation for governments due to the inclusion of new groups into the establishment.

So social transformation through the expansion of human rights was a leitmotif of the domestic politics of Western states at the time the Helsinki process began. But the wave of decolonization and the awakening of the Third World caused a reconsideration of foreign policy instruments as well, from the less-justified methods of direct force to mediated influence through setting an example and using persuasion.

Fifteen years later this would be called "soft power," but at the time, it was packed into a third, humanitarian "basket" of the Helsinki process.

The main deal involved exactly that — the Soviet Union agreed to the "third basket" and formal adherence to human rights in exchange for approval from the West on the first basket — the guaranteed maintenance of Soviet borders and sphere of influence in Europe.

It's doubtful that anyone at the time fully realized the significance of the impending conflict, but it predetermined the development of Europe and the world up to the present day.

From 1975, the Soviet Union took on the role of a classic status quo power, directed not by ideas or even ambitions, but by the necessity of maintaining what it held. The West went in a more ideological direction (implementing a values-based approach) and factual revisionism.

But the matter in question wasn't the geopolitical lines of their opponent, but the latter's socio-political model. All the more so, since the Soviet model was no longer being developed at that point, but preserved.

History shows who won in that deal and who lost. It was only 10 years later that the Soviet Union started to crack. Under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, it moved in the direction of a values-based approach, and then began to withdraw from the geopolitical conquests for which it had initiated the Helsinki process in the first place.

Naturally, the Helsinki process wasn't responsible for the fall of the Soviet Union; the causes had been building up for a long time, and the final straw was incorrect prioritization — external issues over internal. But the set of "baskets" crystallized this position, and that, not stable borders, was the main outcome of Helsinki.

The West, its beliefs confirmed by the break-up of the Soviet bloc, confidently renewed

expansion, relying on the ideology that had proved advantageous. By the middle of the second decade of the 21st century, the advancement of Western influence globally seemed to be stuck. The U.S. and Europe talked about a threat to the current order from revisionist, undemocratic powers — primarily Russia and China.

The West declares its protection of the status quo, but understands that to be its own uninterrupted expansion, since order according to that version means the sequential spread of a liberal world view and its attending mechanisms.

The West, preoccupied with foreign priorities and wishing to prevent revisionist views of the results of the Cold War, is met with a worsening internal condition. The growth of protest movements, mistrust in the ruling class, and the polarization of societies in leading countries all seem similar to 1968, but the current crisis will lead not to reform, but to attempts to preserve what has been accomplished. And that will undermine the "other" power that the West gained when it emerged stronger from the upheavals of the 1960s.

Russia is traveling another winding path. The fall of the Soviet Union led first to the desire to become the West, become part of that "third basket," which had proved its great strength. True, the government structure that they first started to build (with supportive encouragement from the West initially) was actually guided by anything but the idea of expanding real rights and freedoms, and the end result wasn't pretty.

A humanitarian paradise didn't come to pass, and the military/political "first" basket was lost. This caused the drive to restore at least that first basket, especially since in the surrounding world, major countries were again employing direct force.

Russia, accused of being revisionist, is convinced that it is actually trying to maintain the remnants of the status quo, protecting them against the pushy, reckless West. This, however, necessitates occasionally setting aside those immutable principles written 40 years ago.

In short, everything is so confused that it's not even possible to determine who is a revisionist and who is a conservator. Or what is more destructive — Western activism, intended to transform the world, whether the world wants it or not, or the blows of the Russian sword in response, meant as a check against the activist who has gone too far.

When Russia thinks of the Helsinki act, it should take into consideration the lessons the West was ready to impart then, and seems to have forgotten today. Namely, the path to success in the global arena begins with the transformation of external failures into energy for self-development, and a reliance on intellectual human potential.

From the start of the 1990s to the mid-2010s, Russia has accumulated no fewer foreign policy failures than the West in the mid-70s. That is, more than enough raw material on which to reflect and draw the energy needed for social renewal; the same energy that once determined the victory of the West in the Cold War.

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