

The need for dialogue on the meaning of human rights

See the full article titled *Human rights concepts in the OSCE region: Changes since the Helsinki Final Act* here:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02634937.2017.1281790>

By Aaron Rhodes

Over 25 years since the fall of the communist regimes, many civil and political rights have not been secured in the vast majority of the former Soviet republics, despite decades of civil society campaigning within these societies and the various efforts of other states and international organizations, including the OSCE. Citizens often lack access to independent courts, free and independent media, free and fair elections, and freedom of association, while religious freedom is often threatened. Human rights protections have also deteriorated dramatically in Turkey, and are often insufficient in EU member states. The obduracy of repressive practices at variance with the freedoms envisioned by the 1975 Helsinki Accords has been tied to the persistence of political cultures and mentalities, corruption, and ineffective efforts by the international community. The international preoccupation with terrorism and the instability of Middle Eastern countries has drawn focus and resources from the Helsinki signatory states.

At the same time, the fragile consensus in the 1990s on implementing fundamental human rights standards in OSCE participating States has given way to a more overt challenge to the very concept of human rights embedded in the Helsinki Final Act. Eurasianism poses a profound challenge to the classical liberal ideal of universal, individual human rights based on a common human nature; that is, to the principle that a central obligation of a state is to protect the freedoms of its citizens, ideas that have animated the international community since the end of World War II.

But the capacity to defend the right to basic individual freedoms has arguably been weakened by the extension and fragmentation of the concept of human rights, that is, by developments in human rights discourse since the Helsinki Final Act. A complex process driven by state actors opposed to Western liberal democracies, as well as a diffuse array of civil society forces seeking to merge a wide range of 'social justice' concerns into human rights issues, has transformed human rights into a highly ambiguous concept that can even be used to justify repression. There is a danger that the focus on basic liberties has been diluted by an expansive approach to the meaning of human rights, and by more and more services and necessities being deemed 'human rights' in United Nations declarations and by international courts.

Without a consensus on the meaning of human rights and a sense of human rights priorities as placing emphasis on respect for fundamental individual liberties, it is unlikely that substantial further progress can be made on implementing the human rights standards to which participating States of the OSCE have formally committed themselves. The crucial importance of international human rights standards to peaceful civil society communities that are committed to the rule of law and are determined to enjoy their internationally guaranteed human rights is even more clear now than it was in 1975. Our cursory review of human rights developments since Helsinki and the philosophical and political challenges posed by Eurasianism suggests that after more than 40 years, the Helsinki human rights concept is more relevant than ever.