

*Background
Report for
II-A & II-D*

SOVIET CITIZENS AND THE HELSINKI AGREEMENT
ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE:
AWARENESS, SOURCES OF INFORMATION, ATTITUDES

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The Sixth International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
San Francisco, November 25-27, 1977

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IN EUROPE : AWARENESS, SOURCES OF INFORMATION, ATTITUDES

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Introduction

The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which convened in Helsinki in July 1975, received heavy media coverage in both East and West. Soviet media generally viewed it as a political event which ratified European boundaries and rejected all attempts to alter them by force, thereby legitimizing the political map of postwar Europe. Western media, on the other hand, placed special emphasis on the so-called "Basket Three" items--those clauses of the Final Act which dealt with freer human, informational and cultural contacts between the two political blocs. This aspect of the Helsinki agreement was given scant attention in Soviet media.

In December 1976, more than a year after the conference had taken place, and when the initial impressions created by heavy Soviet media coverage would have receded into the background, Soviet travelers to the West were queried in order to ascertain their views on Helsinki, and to determine whether they felt that any changes had taken place in the USSR as a result of the agreement. A total of 301 Soviet citizens replied to questions on this subject through March 1977. While this group can in no way be regarded as a representative sample of the population, to my knowledge the answers to these questions represent the only data that has been systematically gathered concerning the opinions of ordinary Soviet citizens on Helsinki. In the absence of any published Soviet opinion polls on the conference, these interviews may provide some insight into the real thinking of ordinary Soviet citizens, as distinct from the standard line of Soviet media. As in other studies of this sort, the findings reveal that the opinions and attitudes of the Soviet citizens interviewed are considerably more varied than the opinions and attitudes habitually expressed in the Soviet press. An appendix of comments gives some indication of this variegated pattern of response.

Perhaps the most important finding to emerge from the data is the relative lack of importance attached by respondents to the Helsinki agreement. While about eight out of ten respondents were aware of the agreement, over half of them (58%) either had no opinion on it or thought it was basically of no significance. A minority (24%) felt that the agreement would be conducive to peace and international stability

(the usual Soviet media interpretation), but these responses, a disproportionate number of which came from members of the Communist Party, were often expressed in vague, stereotyped terms.⁽¹⁾ About one in four respondents (22%) felt that some changes had taken place as a result of the agreement, and an even smaller proportion (11%) thought that access to information from the West had become easier. In sum, the majority of respondents do not appear to attach great weight to the Helsinki agreement and exhibit a type of "wait and see" skepticism which often typifies attitudes of Soviet citizens to other questions which seem remote from their daily lives. It is also noteworthy that relatively few respondents commented on the human rights aspect of the agreement.

The following statistical analysis examines these points in more detail and also scrutinizes the important role played by Western radio in informing the Soviet listener on Helsinki. However, these statistical findings should not be interpreted as necessarily reflecting actual divisions of opinion of the Soviet population as a whole. Nonetheless, weighed cautiously, relationships of different variables within the data may provide useful insights into the real situation in the USSR.

¹ Several biases may have been encountered in interviewing travelers to the West on this question. While there was at least one incident where a respondent said that he had been instructed not to discuss Helsinki while in the West (see Appendix), several interviewers remarked that many travelers seemed to have been briefed in advance as to what to say concerning Helsinki, and appeared very eager to discuss the topic. These particular respondents usually claimed that the accord was of positive value in furthering world peace.

In the context of a larger study, ⁽²⁾ 301 Soviet citizens responded to the following questions:

In July 1975, countries from both East and West Europe, as well as the United States, met in Helsinki and signed an agreement on security and cooperation in Europe.

- a. Are you personally aware of the Helsinki agreement?
- b. If yes, indicate sources of information.
- c. In your opinion, what is the significance of the Helsinki agreement?
- d. It's now over a year since the Helsinki agreement was signed. Have you noticed any changes in life in the USSR as a result of the agreement? If yes, what?
- e. Since the Helsinki agreement was signed, have you noticed whether information coming from the West (books, newspapers, movies, radio broadcasts, etc.) is more accessible than before? If yes, explain.

Awareness

Eighty-one percent of respondents said they were aware of the Helsinki agreement, 12% said they had not heard of it, 3% refused to reply to the question, and in 4% of cases it was impossible to ascertain whether the respondent was aware of the agreement or not.

Awareness of the agreement was more widespread among respondents who listened to Western radio than among non-listeners (see Table I).

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Survey was conducted by a social science research bureau between December 1976 and March 1977. The group of respondents is not necessarily representative of the population of the USSR as a whole, since it is more urban and more highly educated. None of the respondents was an emigrant from the USSR.

TABLE I
Western Radio Listening and Awareness of Agreement (3)

	<u>Western Radio Listeners</u>	<u>Non-Listeners</u>
	N=142	N=139
Aware	97%	76%
Unaware	3%	24%
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

Sources of Information

The domestic press was the source most frequently cited by respondents aware of the Helsinki agreement, followed closely by Western radio broadcasts (see Table II). Speeches at meetings appear to be another important source, indicating that the agreement has been a prominent topic of domestic political indoctrination.

TABLE II
Sources of Information on Helsinki Agreement

N=202	
Domestic press	48%
Western radio	42%
Meetings	35%
Domestic radio	31%
Domestic TV	30%
Word of Mouth	21%
Other	13%

Total is greater than 100% due to possible multiple responses.

³ In this and subsequent tables, percentages are derived from ascertainable cases only. Consequently, the total number of cases will not equal 301.

Western Radio as a Source of Information

Among respondents who had learned of the Helsinki agreement from Western radio, the Voice of America ranks first, followed by Radio Liberty, the BBC, Deutsche Welle and Radio Sweden (see Table III).

TABLE III

Western Radio Sources of Information on Helsinki Agreement

N=49 (4)

Voice of America	80%
Radio Liberty	31%
BBC	14%
Deutsche Welle	14%
Radio Sweden	8%

An examination of the relative efficiency ⁽⁵⁾ of each station in informing its listeners about the Helsinki agreement shows that VOA and Radio Liberty come very close together at the top of the list, well ahead of the other stations (see Table IV). These rankings may provide an approximate indication of the relative amount of program coverage given the topic by each station, especially in recent months.

⁴ Total number of respondents who indicated a specific Western radio station as a source of information on the Helsinki agreement. Since a respondent may have mentioned more than one station, the percentages add up to more than 100%.

⁵ Efficiency = The ratio of respondents who indicated having heard about the Helsinki agreement from a given station to all listeners to that station in the survey group.

TABLE IV
Efficiency Ratios of Western Broadcasters

	<u>Total listeners to station</u>	<u>Heard of Helsinki agreement from station</u>	<u>Efficiency ratio</u>
Voice of America	104	39	.38
Radio Liberty	43	15	.35
Radio, Sweden	25	4	.16
Deutsche Welle	46	7	.15
BBC	59	7	.12

Attitudes and Opinions on the Helsinki Agreement

Questioned on the significance of the Helsinki agreement, over one-third of respondents expressed no opinion (see Table V). Those who felt it would promote peace and those who considered it to be of no significance whatsoever are represented at approximately equal rates (24% and 23% respectively). Conspicuous by its absence is the conviction that the Helsinki agreement will improve the human rights situation in the USSR.

TABLE V
Significance of Helsinki Agreement

N=194

Will be conducive to peace and international stability	24%
Has no significance	23%
Will improve East-West economic ties	11%
Will increase human contacts between East and West	11%
Good idea but will not be respected by West	1%
Good idea at the institutional level but will not help human rights in USSR	3%
Shows West is "selling out" to USSR	1%
No opinion	35%

Total is greater than 100% due to possible multiple responses.

The majority of respondents felt that no changes had taken place within the USSR as a result of the Helsinki agreement (see Table VI).

TABLE VI
Evidence of Changes in the USSR as a Result of the Helsinki Agreement
N=211

Yes	23%
No	53%
No opinion	24%
	<hr/> 100%

When respondents who felt that changes had taken place were asked to indicate the changes they had observed, the most frequently mentioned innovation was easier travel to the West (see Table VII). Since these interviews were conducted in the West, however, this may be a subjective judgement on the part of the respondents, linking their own movements to the Helsinki agreement. Many of the persons interviewed were unable to provide specific answers to this question.

TABLE VII
Changes Observed in the USSR as a Result of the Helsinki Agreement
N=49

Easier to travel to West	55%
Unspecified superficial changes only	24%
More Western goods available	12%
Improved atmosphere between East and West	6%
Easier access to Western information	4%
Improved human rights situation	2%
Other	14%

Total is greater than 100% due to possible multiple responses.

Asked whether information coming from the West had become more accessible since the Helsinki agreement, a significant majority of responses was again negative (see Table VIII).

TABLE VIII

Is Western Information More Accessible Since Helsinki Agreement?

N=174

Yes	11% (6)
No	64%
No opinion	25%
	100%

Western Radio Listening and Attitudes to the Helsinki Agreement

The small sample of Radio Liberty listeners appears to be less sanguine as to the ultimate implications of the Helsinki agreement and more ready to hold an opinion on it than respondents who listened only to other Western stations excluding RL, or who did not listen to Western broadcasts at all (see Table IX).

⁶ The figure of 11% indicating easier access to Western information in Table VIII does not correspond to the figure of 4% in Table VII on account of the order and manner in which the questions were posed (to some extent at least). The lower figure in Table VII is based on spontaneous answers to an open-ended question (see part (d), page 3). The higher figure in Table VIII is based on responses to a direct question (see part (e), page 3).

TABLE IX
Western Radio Listening and Appraisal of Helsinki Agreement

	<u>Radio Liberty listeners</u>	<u>Listeners to other Western stations (excluding RL)</u>	<u>Non-listeners</u>
	N=35	N=84	N=92
Positive	34%	45%	43%
Negative	6%	4%	2%
Agreement has no significance	46%	24%	9%
No opinion	14%	26%	45%

However, a more critical appraisal of the agreement on the part of Radio Liberty listeners does not necessarily imply that East-West cooperation is rejected outright, nor that Radio Liberty programs paint a gloomy picture of the future of the Helsinki accord. As has been pointed out in earlier analyses, Radio Liberty listeners tend to be both more politically sophisticated in their outlook and more critical of their own society than non-listeners, and this may be the important factor in the above correlation.

APPENDIX: ATTITUDES TO THE HELSINKI AGREEMENT

This appendix aims to present a compendium of the more interesting remarks made by persons interviewed in connection with the Helsinki Agreement. The selection of comments consequently does not necessarily reflect the relative proportions of the categories used in the analytical part of the report.

Significance and Purpose of the Agreement

Many of the respondents who commented on the implications of the agreement contended that its import was largely political, although a few saw it in terms of an aid to commercial expansion.

The agreements mark a milestone on the road to peace, which is a goal that the socialist countries have been striving to obtain for a long time already. (Russian engineer in his 40's from Leningrad, CP member)

The Soviet government was seeking reassurance as to the intentions of the U.S. and Europe regarding the frontiers and the territories of the USSR. (Armenian biologist in his 40's from Yerevan)

It is in the Soviet interest to stay on good terms with capitalist Europe. It discourages any ideas of breaking away on the part of our neighbors and allies, as Hungary and Czechoslovakia, for instance, have already tried to do. (Russian translator in his 40's from Leningrad)

The Soviet state has the best interests of the whole human race at heart. That is why comrade Brezhnev has signed a good will treaty. Our purpose is to make sure that workers in other countries are no longer subject to capitalist exploitation. (Russian shipbuilder in his 30's from Murmansk, Candidate CP member)

We are trying to expand foreign trade so as to launch more consumer products on to the domestic market and thereby enhance our standard of living. (Ukrainian engineer in his 40's from Khabarovsk, CP member)

Chances of Success

Discussing the general significance of the agreement, a number of respondents evaluated its chances of "succeeding" (although the notion of "success" was rarely given a precise meaning). The following comments are typical of positive reactions to the agreement.

In the long run, the agreement will prove both effective and positive. (Russian engineer in his 50's from Tula)

The agreement should satisfy many countries since it contains something to benefit everyone. (Russian economist in her 20's from Leningrad)

The Helsinki agreements stand a good chance of success because the West is determined to make the Soviets put them into effect, whatever the price. (Russian agricultural representative in his 30's from Minsk)

It is proof positive of the sincere desire of men representing very different economic systems to work together and understand each other. (Russian economist in his 30's from Leningrad)

Many of the more negative comments on the agreement emphasized the gap between words and actions, and the Soviet leaders' failure to regard a mere signature as binding on them.

A lot of fuss about nothing. (Armenian physician in his 30's from Yerevan)

The Helsinki Agreement is nothing more nor less than a bag full of papers which will swell the already bulging archives. (Russian writer in his 50's from Moscow)

Helsinki is a lot of eyewash. Brezhnev himself has said quite openly that the agreement doesn't mean a letting up in the ideological struggle. (Russian translator in his 40's from Leningrad)

The agreement is nothing new, since the USSR has already signed similar accords relating to human rights at the United Nations. I don't understand why Westerners are so surprised that the Soviet Union is taking no notice of this agreement, in view of the fact that it never took any notice of the others. (Armenian engineer in his 40's from Yerevan)

It's nothing but talk. The Russians have never listened to anyone where the question of freedom of opinion and freedom of movement is concerned, and I doubt whether they have any intention of doing so now. (Armenian accountant in his 40's from Leninakan)

It's one thing to sign an agreement and another to apply it. No external force is capable of obliging our authorities to put the agreement into effect, even though they have signed it. (Russian electrical engineer in his 30's from Saratov)

A number of other respondents revealed a more ambivalent attitude to the agreements, expressing reservations of one kind or another. One group maintained that firm limits must be set on any understanding with the West.

We are anxious to develop our relations with Western countries, but unfortunately they are incapable of envisaging economic cooperation without political cooperation--meaning freedom to interfere in our domestic affairs. Obviously this is unacceptable to us. (Russian economist in her 40's from Volgograd)

Although we wish to strengthen our economic ties with the West, we will never accept its morals and debauched way of life. (Russian factory director in his 40's from Voroshilovgrad, CP member)

Another group affirmed that the Soviet Union has already proved its good will and readiness to cooperate, and that the success of the agreements now depended on the ability of the West to do likewise. It is noteworthy that all these comments were made by CP members.

The Soviet Union wanted the agreement to be signed in order to safeguard the policy of detente. Nothing has changed, because there is nothing to be changed. It's the West which must modify its attitude. (Russian journalist in his 50's from Kiev, CP member)

The Soviet Union has always observed the principles of the Helsinki agreement. The question is, Do the Western countries do the same? (Ukrainian engineer in his 30's from Ivan-Frankovsk, CP member)

By participating in this conference, the USSR has proved its good intentions and shown its desire to work together with the West to maintain world peace. After this demonstration of good faith on our part, it is now the turn of other countries to demonstrate theirs. (Russian engineer in his 40's from Rostov, CP member)

A conflicting viewpoint placed an onus of a different kind upon the West; namely, responsibility for ensuring the implementation of the Helsinki Agreements.

If Western Europe brings continual pressure to bear on our government, it is possible that the Soviet Union will be forced to put the agreement it has signed into effect. (Belorussian doctor in his 40's from Minsk)

The agreement would have been extremely valuable, if only an international commission responsible for making sure it was put into effect had been set up at the same time. (Russian accountant in his 30's from Kherson)

It's not that we don't have laws in the Soviet Union; it's just that they aren't applied. It is the failure of Western heads of state of intervene that allows the government to ignore the agreements. (Armenian teacher in his 40's from Leninakan)

Existence and Feasibility of Change

As regards evidence of changes stemming from the agreement, even respondents who answered in the affirmative were unable to point to any but minor changes of restricted impact.

Changes can only come gradually, and it seems that a good start has been made. Trade is in the process of expansion, and everything else will follow on from there. (Russian engineer in his 50's from Tula)

A short time ago, it would have been unthinkable of receive permission to go abroad only a fortnight after putting in a request. (Ukrainian engineer in his 30's from Zaporozhe)

Dissidents are now being expelled instead of being sent to the camps. (Armenian engineer in his 30's from Astrakhan)

Conversely, it was suggested that the whole question of change was irrelevant.

We have shown by this agreement that we are ready to make a large number of concessions to foreign countries in order to preserve world peace. However, this does not mean that there is any reason, or indeed any need, to make changes in our own country. (Ukrainian designer in her 30's from Kherson, Candidate CP member)

The purpose of the agreement was not to transform our way of life, but to reach an understanding with the West on European security. (Russian engineer in his 30's from Kuybyshev, Candidate CP member)

A few respondents examined the repercussions that the Helsinki agreement, if rigorously observed, would have on the Soviet system.

If the agreements were applied to the letter, there is no doubt that everything would be turned upside down, and I don't think that that's about to happen. (Russian mechanic in his 40's from Rostov)

If all the tenets of the agreement were observed, the USSR would become a true democracy. (Russian writer in his 30's from Leningrad)

Pursuing the same train of thought, most of the respondents who denied that any significant changes had so far taken place implied that, given the nature of the system there was no possibility at all of changes ever taking place.

Changes ? You must be joking! (Russian engineer in his 30's from Tselinograd)

It's true that there have been a number of cultural exchanges, but it's all for show. It impresses some people and placates others. (Russian musician in his 30's from Moscow)

I have noticed no changes, and I don't see what could be changed. (Russian translator in his 30's from Kiev)

They give the impression that they want to change things, but there's no truth in it. Nobody dares. (Russian fitter in his 30's from Odessa)

It's naive to think that the Soviet state will ever open its frontiers. (Armenian laboratory worker in her 30's from Yerevan)

However, another school of thought maintained that in due course, or in other circumstances, it was not impossible that changes might be introduced.

One year is too short a time for anything to have changed. (Russian nurse in her 50's from Moscow, CP member)

It is useless to try and rush things. We must leave it up to history. (Russian economist in his 40's from Leningrad, CP member)

If Brezhnev were thirty years younger, there is no doubt that he would be doing a lot more towards implementing the agreements. (Russian agricultural engineer in her 20's from Novosibirsk)

Changes take time in the Soviet Union. Everyone is wary of taking too much upon himself, seeing that it is political rather than administrative decisions that are at stake. (Belorussian doctor in his 40's from Minsk)

Increased Access to Western Information

Although a majority of respondents denied that information coming from the West was any more accessible than before the Helsinki conference, a small number of those interviewed contradicted this opinion.

Positive Comments:

It is much easier to get Western information now. (Russian student in his 20's from Leningrad)

On the basis of these agreements, a reduction of jamming of foreign radio stations could be envisaged, on condition that they show greater tolerance and understanding. (Russian agronomist in his 40's from Leningrad, CP member)

Negative Comments:

It is no easier to get Western information--on the contrary. For about six months Radio Liberty, Radio Peking, and sometimes even VOA have been heavily jammed. (Russian agronomist in his 40's from Norilsk)

Access to Western information is as difficult as before. Everything you want to know is illegal. (Russian optician in his 20's from Moscow)

Western Information is Superfluous

A claim put forward principally by CP or Candidate CP members was that, as with the inauguration of changes, the question of information had nothing to do with the Helsinki agreement.

The purpose of the agreement is not to make Western information more accessible, but to further detente between the Soviet Union and Western countries. (Russian agricultural worker in his 40's from Leningrad oblast, CP member)

There is no need for Western information, for our own is far more instructive and consequently more popular with the people. (Russian university lecturer in her 30's from Kishinev, Candidate CP member)

Peaceful information from the West has always been available in the Soviet Union. What we don't need is imperialist information, such as that broadcast by Western stations in contravention of the principles of the Helsinki agreement. (Russian engineer in his 40's from Leningrad, CP member)

A Sensitive Topic

A number of respondents declined to reply to one or more parts of the question for reasons which were not always evident. However, one man, interviewed in March 1977, explained clearly his reasons for refusing to engage in a discussion of the subject:

Before leaving for the West, we were formally advised to refrain from discussing this topic with anyone at all. So please excuse me for not doing so. (Russian artist in his 30's from Samarkand)