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“Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe”

Podcast of the discussion between Arthur Hartman, the former Director of the Bureau of European Affairs in the US Department of State and Oliver Bange on the occasion of a book launch at the Wilson Center, Washington D.C.¹

Stephan Kieninger, Mannheim University
stephankieninger@hotmail.com

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reports/PDF/Helsinki1975.pdf>

On September 23, 2008, former US top diplomat Arthur Hartman, Director of the Bureau of European Affairs in the State Department from 1974 and 1977, and subsequently Ambassador to France for four years and to the Soviet Union for six years, commented on the book “Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe”² which is edited by Oliver Bange and Gottfried Niedhart. The book launch was hosted by the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington D.C. The recently published anthology deals with the Helsinki process, starting in the 1960s and providing the framework for stable and peaceful change in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Taking the very topic of the book as a starting point, the discussion focused on current issues like the conflict in Georgia and the relationship between the EU countries and Russia. It became quite evident that the multilateral CSCE process can serve as a model for the solution of today’s security issues. The conflict between Russia and Georgia, the relations between the United States and Russia as well as nonproliferation conflicts like those with Iran and North Korea were mentioned. Bange considered the CSCE process as a successful case for a “sustainable diplomacy” precisely

¹ A video of the book launch is available online on the webpage of the Wilson Center, see http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.event_summary&event_id=466717.

² Oliver Bange, Gottfried Niedhart (Eds.): Helsinki 1975 and the Transformation of Europe, Berghahn Books, Oxford/New York 2008.

because it offered important benefits to all official sides involved and because it worked on both the state as well as on the societal levels.

In his introductory remarks, Bange referred to the cover of the book. On blue background, two paragraphs of the Helsinki Final Act are shining in orange-colored letters. It is the formula on the so-called peaceful change of frontiers and the statement on freer movement of people, information and ideas. These two items and their ramifications for the German question are at the center of the analysis.

Bange defined the term transformation as a longish, drawn-out process of stable change in contradiction to sudden or revolutionary change. Transformation meant opening up Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for Western ideas via more freedom of movement in East-West relations and via more communication across the Iron Curtain in order to initiate a process of peaceful and gradual change aimed at overcoming the division of Europe – this was the rational of policy-makers like Brandt, Pompidou and Wilson. In their approach, the CSCE offered the ideal platform for this strategy.

The book poses a number of pivotal questions: How could the offensive Western concept of inducing change in Central and Eastern Europe coexist with the defensive, status quo focused approaches in the Nixon White House and Brezhnev's Kremlin? How could the transformation policy finally prevail in the CSCE negotiations? Who were the policymakers and diplomats pursuing this transformation strategy? How were they connected with each other and how did they eventually out-maneuvre the skeptics within their own administrations? What was the interrelationship between the apparently “soft” contents of the CSCE negotiations and the “hard” military issues of the negotiations on strategic nuclear weapons (SALT) and mutual troop cuts (MBFR)? Which role did economics play? And last but not least: Did the communist leaderships of the Warsaw Pact realize the subversive rational of this “soft” Western strategy and how did they react both on a bilateral as well as on a multilateral level?

Bange pointed out that believing in the possibility of inducing change in the societies of Central and Eastern Europe was an essential prerequisite for Western politicians and diplomats in order to being able to conceptualize and then implement such a transformation policy vis-à-vis the East. Not all Western policy makers shared the assumption of being able to bring about change in the East. The most prominent and most powerful skeptics were sitting in the White House. Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger pursued détente as a purely stability focused, defensive, state centered Realpolitik. But due to the intransigence of his Western European allies in the CSCE negotiations – both vis-à-vis the White House as well as the Kremlin – Kissinger, despite his persistent doubts, had no other choice than supporting the key elements of the transformation approach in the CSCE: freer movement and peaceful change.

Subsequently, Arthur Hartman gave the audience his recollections and insights on this very topic. Arguing that the U.S. had to support the demands of the Western Europeans

for freer movement and for peaceful change in order to prevent a major confrontation within NATO, Hartman succeeded in eventually bringing Kissinger around. Hartman and a small number of highly influential Foreign Service Officers in the State Department shared the assumptions of the Western Europeans. According to Hartman, the CSCE's regulations in Basket III were the most subversive policy being possible at that time. In essence, Hartman continued pursuing the policy of bridge building toward the communist states – a policy that the State Department had continued from the days of the Johnson administration despite the status quo détente in the Nixon White House.

Why did the Eastern European leaders agree to the CSCE process? Based on the archival evidence presented in the volume, Oliver Bange concluded that three misperceptions were decisive. First of and foremost, they regarded the content of the Helsinki Final Act's Basket III as an irrelevant box of words. In their perception, power laid with nuclear warheads, tanks and troops. Secondly, they were convinced that the West's implicit recognition of borders and rulers would allow them to socialize new generations within their communist systems. These new socialist citizens should be immune with regard to alternative models. And thirdly, communist leaders remained convinced that they could keep control over the dissident and reform movements.

At the end of the CSCE process was, however, the breakdown of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe, and one state completely vanished – the GDR. Had the leadership under Honecker initiated the process of the GDR's demise by signing the Helsinki Final Act? Based on archival evidence from the GDR's Foreign Ministry, this provoking question is at the centre of Oliver Bange's and Stephan Kieninger's recently published E-Dossier "Negotiating One's Own Demise".³

During the concluding discussion with the audience, Hartman critically emphasized that – with regard to the early 1990s – Western policy makers should have put more thought on the question of how to establish a new network of relations towards Russia and the other successor states of the Soviet Union. Hartman argues that the West should have interpreted the breakdown of the Soviet Union as a sign towards the establishment of a new détente process. During the talks that led up to German unification, the United States had given the Soviets reassurances that it would restrain itself and would never station U.S. troops on the territory of the former Soviet Union. At this point, Hartman referred to the crisis in Georgia and drew parallels to the situation in Kosovo. Putin, Medvedev and the whole Russian leadership viewed Kosovo as a precedent for Georgia – and they demanded self-determination for all Russians living outside of Russia's borders.

³ Oliver Bange/Stephan Kieninger: "Negotiating One's Own Demise? The GDR's Foreign Ministry and the CSCE Negotiations: Plans, Preparations, Tactics and Presumptions", Cold War International History Project, E-Dossier No. 17, September 2008. The E-Dossier, an essay by Siegfried Bock, the head of the GDR's delegation at the CSCE, and the edited documents from the GDR's Foreign Ministry are also available online. See http://www.wilsoncenter.org/index.cfm?topic_id=1409&fuseaction=topics.publications&doc_id=402045&group_id=13349.

In both cases, the UN system was being outmaneuvered. Hartman emphasized that today's policy makers had to put more thought on the question of how to reconcile the right of self determination for people within states with the international system of nation states.

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