## Reimagining the Human Rights Movement: From NGOisation to Civic Power

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In times of despair, our ability to imagine and project is threatened, yet a long-term vision still provides inspiration. Anna Akhmatova once said – as we are painfully reminded – despair can be more truthful than illusory hope. Yet, despair is not the end of the story. Even in the darkest of moments, there is the possibility of reimagining, of resistance, and of renewal. And if the human rights movement is to stay relevant – if it is to reclaim its power – it must undergo profound transformation.

We live in a time of war, not metaphorically, but literally. For many of us, war is no longer an abstraction or a crisis confined to foreign policy papers. It is a daily reality. And it reshapes everything – from our sense of safety to our strategic frameworks. In this context, the language of "shrinking civic space" and technocratic "capacity building" rings hollow. Something more foundational is at stake.

We must shift the paradigm – from a professionalised, donor-driven NGO system to a movement anchored in grassroots civic power.

### From projects to power: Reclaiming the civic core

For decades, human rights work has become increasingly formalised. We have produced reports, drafted toolkits, refined policy recommendations. All of this has value. But the other side of it has been a gradual depoliticization and a growing distance from the people we claim to represent. Human rights defenders have become service providers, project managers, or consultants. The Helsinki movement was never meant to be that.

As Lyudmila Alexeyeva, the late chair of the Moscow Helsinki group, reminded us in her farewell address that the original purpose of the Helsinki process was to place human dignity at the centre of political life – not to create another bureaucracy. The Moscow Helsinki Group and other Helsinki groups did not start as "implementing partners." They were ordinary people – scientists, writers, factory workers, doctors – who risked their freedom to document repression and demand a different future. That radical insistence that "human rights are everyone's business" must be recovered today.

Yet this reclamation requires more than nostalgia. It demands action. It calls for reconnecting with environmental defenders, feminist, antiwar and anti-colonial initiatives, grassroots organisers,

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mutual aid networks, alternative schools – what we might call "islands of civicness" amid the overwhelming sea of authoritarianism and repression. These are the seeds of new approaches and the new movements.

This reclamation must also mean re-centring political imagination in our work. The original Helsinki movement challenged state-centric security by proposing a moral architecture of mutual accountability. If today's human rights movement is to matter, it must recover that edge – not by simply critiquing power, but by building alternatives to it. That includes supporting grassroots organising not as "beneficiaries," but as co-leaders of a global civic renaissance. We must invest in civic infrastructures that can survive the collapse of political institutions – and prepare to lead in the reconstruction ahead.

**Civil society: From tokenism to influence**

Civil society today finds itself trapped in symbolic roles. We are invited to speak but not to decide. We submit reports only to see them shelved. In the OSCE context – one of the few international organisations to institutionalise civil society access – our presence is often limited to consultations without consequences.

Referring to Sherry Arnstein's "ladder of participation",[2] current civil society engagement in the OSCE rarely rises above the fifth step – placation. Real partnership, delegated power, or citizen control remain elusive.

This disconnect is not merely procedural; it is political. As was argued in several Helsinki+50 Reflection Project seminars, civil society must not be confined to the "third dimension" (human rights) while being systematically excluded from the "first" and "second" (military-political and economic-environmental) dimensions. Security without true civic participation is not security – it is coercion.

To transform this reality, we need to move beyond ceremonial inclusion and build institutional pathways for participatory governance. Tina Nabatchi and Matt Leighninger's "six building blocks of engagement"[3] offer a framework: from information dissemination and feedback gathering to deliberation, joint decision-making, and community-led implementation. These are not just technical reforms – they are democratic obligations. The OSCE, as a regional security institution, must take seriously the idea that sustainable peace requires civic agency – not just among diplomats, but within societies. Civil society, in turn, must build the capacity to exercise power proactively.

We need to reimagine the OSCE as a space for civic co-creation, not just state-to-state negotiation. Civil society should help set agendas, inform operational strategies, and evaluate outcomes.

[2] Sherry R. Arnstein. "A Ladder Of Citizen Participation". Journal of the American Institute of Planners Volume 35, 1969 - Issue 4 (1969). Pp. 216-224. Published online on 26 November 2007. See: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/epdf/10.1080/01944366908977225?needAccess=true

[3] Public Participation for 21st Century Democracy. Ed: Tina Nabatchi, Matt Leighninger. Jossey-Bass, 2015. See https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781119154815

Initiatives like the UN World Citizens' Initiative or the proposal for civil society advisory boards at the OSCE Permanent Council show concrete ideas to move forward with this.

**Islands of civicness: A counter-logic to war**

One of the most inspiring concepts I have come across in recent years is Professor Mary Kaldor's "islands of civicness".[4] These are pockets – often fragile, informal, and localised – where civic values survive and resist the dominant logic of militarism, sectarianism, and authoritarianism.

They may be doctors operating underground clinics in Syria, or Ukrainian volunteers raising funds and documenting war crimes amid the devastation of Ukrainian cities, or libraries and bookshops defying government censorship in the U.S. or Russia. They may also be alternative schools where parents shelter children from state propaganda, or grassroots feminist cooperatives providing shelters, support and welcoming communities.

"Islands of civicness" are not just exceptions – they are frontlines of a different paradigm. They offer a civic counter-logic to war and polarisation: one built on care, participation, human dignity, diversity and pluralism. These islands can form a transnational archipelago of resilience. We must learn to recognise them not just as stories of hope, but as laboratories of democratic renewal. These civic spaces offer not only services but meaning. They are ethical positions – forms of life rooted in solidarity, participation, and justice. Communities of resistance and hope. And they remind us that another kind of society is possible, even in the midst of violence. Supporting them means creating opportunities and safe corridors of cooperation, solidarity and recognition – especially in societies where the civic fabric is being torn apart by war and repression.

**From civil society as audience to civil society as actor**

In her final address, Lyudmila Alexeyeva warned against the bureaucratisation of human rights work and called for a renewed commitment to public education, cross-generational dialogue, and unity across movements. Her call remains urgent.

Civic actors should not be relegated to monitoring roles. They must be empowered as co-authors of policy and co-designers of peace processes. In the OSCE context, this means rethinking civil society participation not as event attendance but as structural engagement – from early warning systems to peace negotiations.

This shift requires civil society to become not just louder, but more organised. Engagement means more than statements; it requires building lasting platforms for collaboration across borders, sectors, and generations. Civil society should be investing in spaces for long-term civic learning and strategic thinking – "schools of civil diplomacy," as some have called them. Proposals such as developing an OSCE-wide strategy for civil society integration across all three baskets, institutionalising advisory roles, and expanding the mandate of the Special Representative on Civil Society are also steps in that direction.

[4] See, for example, "Democracy from below: What real utopias can we build on?" A podcast with Professor Mary Kaldor in the podcast series "Democracy in Question?", co-produced by the Geneva Graduate Institute's Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy and the Institute for Human Sciences Vienna, 25 February 2021. https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/democracy-below-what-real-utopias-can-we-build

More broadly, we need to cultivate what scholar Tina Nabatchi calls the “building blocks of engagement” – from disseminating information and gathering input to enabling community-led decisions. This infrastructure of participation must be inclusive, multilingual, and trauma-informed – particularly in societies scarred by repression and war. Our participation must be thick, not thin: deliberative, inclusive, and aimed at collective decision-making.

**The movement we need: A future beyond borders**

The future of the human rights movement must be intersectional, internationalist, and insurgent. It must break out of its silos – connecting human rights with environmental justice, digital rights, alternative economics, and postcolonial critique. Civic actors should act as conveners of cross-issue alliances that challenge the very architecture of impunity, militarism and oppression.

Ukraine’s resistance exemplifies this spirit – not only in military terms, but in its civic courage. Volunteer networks, feminist initiatives, and community organisers are redefining what it means to defend freedom. Their work points toward a vision of security grounded in solidarity, not domination.

As we approach the OSCE’s 50th anniversary, we must remember that the Helsinki Final Act was not just a treaty – it was a promise. A promise that people, not only states, shape peace. Our call for a "Helsinki from Below" and "Helsinki Beyond Borders" is both a memory and a mandate.

**Recommendations to OSCE bodies and participating States**

1. Institutionalise civic participation: Establish advisory bodies and civic co-creation spaces in all OSCE dimensions, including security and environment.
2. Support islands of civicness: Map, protect, and invest in civic spaces under repression; enable mobility and recognition.
3. Reform civil society representation: Expand the mandate of the CiO Special Representative on Civil Society; introduce mechanisms for joint agenda-setting and feedback. Experiment with participatory models and frameworks.
4. Advance human security frameworks: Embed the concept of human security in all OSCE programs; bridge the gap between early warning and civic-led response.
5. Launch schools of civil diplomacy: Support cross-border civic education initiatives in the OSCE space and beyond.

**Conclusion: Courage and imagination**

We are at a crossroads. The institutions we built are faltering. The principles we uphold are under assault. But the people – the citizens, the activists, the volunteers – are still here. Still organising. Still believing.

Let us not wait for inclusion. Let us insist on relevance. Let us claim our role not just as witnesses, but as architects of a new civic order.

Let this be our legacy – and our horizon.