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Alternating Visions of Europe's Post-Cold War Security Architecture: Finnish, American, and Russian Peace Mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh 1995–1997

Bradley Reynolds, MScS defended his doctoral dissertation entitled "Alternating Visions of Europe´s Post-Cold War Security Architecture – Finnish, American, and Russian Peace Mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh 1995–1997" in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, on 14 December 2024 at 12:00. The public examination took place at the following address: Porthania, Suomen Laki-sali, Yliopistonkatu 3. Professor Jussi Hanhimäki, Geneva Graduate Institute, served as the opponent, and Professor Juhana Aunesluoma as the custos. The dissertation is available in an electronic form in the open repository of the University of Helsinki, Helda.

Lectio praecursoria

Honored Custos, honored Opponent, members of the audience. Today I will present my doctoral dissertation for public examination, titled "Alternating Visions of Europe's Post-Cold War Security Architecture: Finnish, American, and Russian Peace Mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh 1995–1997."[1] This work is the result of multi-national archival research from Finnish, American, European Union, United Nations, United Kingdom, and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) archives. This is paired with oral history interviews with Finnish and American decision-makers, utilizing a method I term Foreign Policy Oral History.[2]

In this doctoral dissertation, I argue for continued research on smaller states in international history.[3] Great power politics has been in vogue for some years now. We should not forget, however, the numerous policy projects smaller states undertook in the Cold War, as well as the post-Cold War period. These actions also shaped the European security architecture. I utilize the case study

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of Finnish peace mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh, through the OSCE Minsk Group from 1995–1997, as one example to prove this point.

Finland, together with Russia, was responsible for leading and co-chairing the OSCE Minsk Group. This was the diplomatic body responsible for peace mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Other former Warsaw Pact states, newly independent states that formed out of the Soviet collapse,[4] as well as France, Germany, and the U.S. were also Minsk Group members.

Nagorno-Karabakh was a formally autonomous region in the Soviet Union that devolved into partisan conflict in 1988, contributing to Soviet collapse. Full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan ensued until a ceasefire was brokered by Russia in 1994. A final peace agreement, however, remained elusive and incentivized international attention. Finland was significant as a mediator of this conflict. It was the first time Finland attempted to mediate an armed conflict in what Russia considered its near abroad.

In presenting the case of Nagorno-Karabakh peace mediation, I will outline two main contributions my research makes, as well as one contribution to contemporary debates on Finnish foreign policy. The main contribution of my work is to academic research on Finnish foreign and security policy in the post-Cold War period. The second is to larger debates on the historiography of European security in the 1990s. Here, I contemplate the politicized nature of research on this period.

This then leads to the third, societal reflection of my work. Scholarship on the 1990s continues to grow. I believe we should further consider how historical research, as well as contemporary political debate, are increasingly intertwined. This is not necessarily a negative phenomenon, but one that needs to be consciously reflected on to maintain a democratic history culture, as well as democratic debate on foreign policy.

I will thus argue in this lectio that our understanding of the 1990s remains in a shade of gray. This inhibits both the creativity, as well as the political possibilities we willingly consider in contemporary foreign policy debates.

Much of the academic literature to date on European security politics focuses on U.S.-Russian relations, as well as NATO and EU enlargement. This is a valuable body of research and pertinent to contemporary policy problems. At the same time, I encourage historians to ask, does this focus accurately represent the complexity of the era?

In returning multiple shades of color to the 1990s, historians must reach beyond the question of whether NATO should have enlarged or not. Histo-

rians should consider what parallel, less successful policy initiatives tell us about the collective hopes, and disappointments, of the era.

Peace mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh is one such initiative. This storyline shifts the geographical focus on European security debates from continental Europe to the post-Soviet space proper. This is significant as the OSCE functioned in the post-Soviet space in ways the EU and NATO could not. This is an aspect of European security debates that has only begun to be comprehensively researched. This is also a research focus that by and large requires a perspective other than a focus on U.S. foreign policy. This is because Washington was "woefully ignorant" of the region until 1997, as described by Fredrik Starr, founder of the Kennan Institute.[5]

The South Caucasus in the mid-1990s represented a critical moment and context for debates on if and how European security in continental Europe should be tied to security in the post-Soviet space. Would all former Warsaw Pact states and newly independent states truly be allowed to 'return to Europe' or was there a hierarchy of belonging?

A prominent mantra of the period was that post-Cold War European security would no longer be defined by dividing lines.[6] However, academics recognized that if Western Europe and North America were excluded from the Caucasus, this would lead to a divisibility in European security.[7] In other words, a new dividing line. Nagorno-Karabakh fostered a debate over what the new parameters of Europe would be, as well as where a new Europe would end.

A key question in this debate was addressing what Max Jacobson termed the unknown factor in European security politics – Russia.[8] What would Russia's position be inside of, or in cooperation with, a new Europe? This was an interesting problematique as the question of what to do regarding Russia differed depending on where one looked. Policy debates for answering this question coalesce around which institutions should work in which regions of a new Europe.

Finland was one of the few countries in Europe that continued to significantly focus on the challenge of the post-Soviet space in the 1990s. Finns, along with numerous newly independent states and former Warsaw Pact states, understood that Russia could easily become revanchist. Many Western European and North American decision-makers, on the other hand, neglected that it would be important to provide stability in the post-Soviet space. This was due to either ignorance, or a perception that it was best to leave these regions to the Russians. While Helsinki found allies where they could to maintain focus on the

newly independent states, this was by and large an uphill battle. The inability to collectively solve these challenges in the 1990s is woefully apparent today.

Peace mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh was thus seen as an opportunity. It was a top three issue on the U.S. President Bill Clinton – Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin agenda from 1994 to 1996. As such, it gave Finnish decision-makers seats at many tables. It allowed Finland to build new networks based on existing Finnish foreign policy expertise, also building a new reputation through the process. Taking responsibility for the OSCE offered important political capital when advocating for Helsinki's preferences on how different European security institutions should develop in the 1990s.

When Finland joined the EU in 1995, Hiski Haukkala and Hanna Ojanen argued that Finland carried a 'burden of proof' to demonstrate that Finland's Russian expertise was an asset rather than a restriction.[9] U.S. Ambassador to the Minsk Group Joseph Presel noted that various members of the international community were suspicious that Finland would not be able to balance Russia in peace mediation, as 'ghosts of Finlandization' might remain.[10] The Russians themselves were reported to be 'suspiciously enthusiastic' of a Finnish-Russian Co-Chairmanship for the Minsk Group.[11]

Juho Ovaska, in his pathbreaking work on Finnish foreign policy in the 1980s and early 1990s, argued that no effort was made by Helsinki to balance between East and West once the Cold War was over.[12] A study of Finland's reformulation of Russia policy in the post-Cold War period, which Nagorno-Karabakh mediation was an important piece of, shows that the definitions of East and West were fluid in this period. Finnish diplomats did continue to balance between the U.S. and Moscow. Old diplomatic tools and Russian expertise were utilized to convince Moscow that cooperation and integration into a new Europe was their best course of action. While this appears idealistic in hindsight, Finnish diplomats nonetheless achieved measurable results. Finns proved their Russian expertise to Brussels as well as Washington. This meant occasionally contesting EU and U.S. policy. Finns also began to build a Russian expertise for a new era. This meant an expertise on the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the post-Soviet space more generally. Significantly, this was a competency the EU lacked at the time.

We can see at least three lasting traces of how the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairmanship supported a reformulation of Finland's expertise on Russia.

Firstly, The Finnish Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee (ulkoasiainvaliokunta) continues to argue for maintaining Finland's Russia expertise post-2022.[13] The Finnish history of the OSCE Minsk Group is an example of how

Finnish diplomats not only maintained, but expanded their knowledge of Russia and adjacent regions in a period of profound international flux. Nowhere is this more apparent than with Ambassador Terhi Hakala, a former member of the Finnish Minsk Group Team and now EU Special Representative to Central Asia.[14] Heikki Talvitie, Chair of the Finnish Minsk Process, was also the first EU Special Representative in the South Caucasus 2003–2006. I expect that Finland's 2025 Chairpersonship of the OSCE will be a similar opportunity to maintain and expand competencies on Ukraine, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Russia.[15]

Secondly, the Finnish-Russian Co-Chairmanship of the OSCE Minsk Group also shows how Finnish diplomats expanded their competencies in European security politics. They learned to utilize multiple institutions to promote Helsinki's vision for a new European security architecture. The OSCE was simply an entry point and an institution that Finnish diplomats had experience working through. This allowed Finns to advocate for both an EU strategy on the Caucasus, as well as Russia. An EU Common Strategy on Russia came to fruition during Finland's 1999 Presidency of the EU Council.

Last, but not least, mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh, significantly, offered Helsinki a new view of Washington. Working intimately with the Americans gave Finnish diplomats an introduction to the complexities of American policy towards Russia as well as the significance of oil politics in American foreign policy. It thus became apparent that Washington was an equal, if not bigger, challenge than Moscow.

In building off this last point, and in making my second argument on the current limitations of European security historiography in the 1990s, I will make a short digression to discuss the Dayton Accords and Peace mediation in Bosnia.

In 1997, the U.S. State Department published a book titled *The Road to Dayton U.S. Diplomacy and the Bosnia Peace Process, May-December 1995*.[16] This was the result of a U.S. State Department project titled the Dayton History Project. Bosnia and Nagorno-Karabakh were two parallel peace mediation and policy initiatives in 1995. By juxtaposing these two processes and asking why, as well as how, each has been written into the narrative of the 1990s, an interesting reflection arises on the state of contemporary and historiographical debate on European security.

For the Dayton History Project, a historian, Derek Chollet, was given unfettered access in 1996 to classified U.S. State Department documents, as well as broad interview access to the highest levels of U.S. foreign policy decision-

making. An unprecedented advantage in studying foreign policy history, only one year after the policy initiative no less.

The Dayton History Project was an attempt by the U.S. State Department to first and foremost create a comprehensive archive for future study. A second significant stated objective was to record best practices in successful American peace negotiations for future initiatives.

Also in 1997, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs published *Finland as a Mediator in the Karabakh Conflict*. This is a similar, but much shorter text. The Finnish report was 30 pages, compared to the Dayton History Project, which was 270. Along with the Finnish report, an extensive archive was preserved in the Finnish National Archive and Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archive until a researcher might stumble upon them after their 25-year period of classification.

The monograph I am defending here today is a peculiar reflection on the Dayton History Project. "The secret history of Dayton," as it was titled by the State Department, shows the power of the state in facilitating public debate on foreign policy history, but also the tunnel vision such access can bring.

A key piece of the Dayton History project was recording how to placate Russia in multilateral peace mediation environments. U.S. officials believed that being able to successfully cooperate with Russia in multilateral peace mediation formats would be key for influencing Russian behavior in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space as well as having Moscow accept NATO enlargement.

These recorded best practices, while largely adhered to by the Finns in the OSCE Minsk Group, were seemingly forgotten in America's high-level mediation attempts in Nagorno-Karabakh. This was reflected when Russian Federation President Yeltsin told Strobe Talbott, U.S. Deputy Secretary of State at the time, to stop telling the newly independent states that Russia was still the evil empire.[17] In parallel, Talbott curiously perceived that Moscow was ambivalent about the South Caucasus and that he could win the Nobel Peace Prize for work on Nagorno-Karabakh peace mediation.[18] The OSCE Minsk Group thus became a barometer of deteriorating Russian-American relations in a markedly non-NATO context.

Nagorno-Karabakh mediation has remained hidden from the historiography of European security in the 1990s. Failed policy initiatives are not often the histories states, or decision-makers, want to be remembered for. Talbott ignores Nagorno-Karabakh in his memoirs.[19] He avoids the question multiple times in oral history interviews conducted by the U.S. State Department.[20] His personal biographer, when asked about Nagorno-Karabakh, didn't even know that this

was a region of the world Talbott worked in. Therefore, if nothing else, the Finnish story of peace mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh allows us to question what we think we know about European security debates in the 1990s and why.

Due to the hidden nature of historical traces from the American side, Nagorno-Karabakh peace mediation is a policy that needs to be studied from the Finnish perspective - this is where the comprehensive documentation lies. American diplomats who worked with the Minsk Group are largely unwilling to speak on record about the policy initiative. The only one who did, Ambassador Joseph Pressel, did so one week before passing away. His testimony, once published, began to be quoted by other American retired diplomats as a way of saying what they could not themselves.

While Bosnia as an American success is recorded, Nagorno-Karabakh as a failure is absent from the historical record. This dissertation attempts to begin countering existing narratives of the 1990s that have largely preserved the history of successful policy initiatives.

The way in which we address the past also has implications for how we discuss the present as well as the future. Forgetting past failures has profound implications for how we debate policy in the present. Just think what American foreign policy would be without the memory of, and extensive research on, the Vietnam War.

For example, the political debate in Finland over Finlandization, or post-Finlandization, would greatly benefit from academic, historical analysis.

Juhana Aunesluoma has asserted that "the better the understanding of the context in which the Finns operated in – both from the eastern and western sides – the less there will be need for polarization in the domestic debate."[21] Finlandization is often polarizing as we have limited research on the topic, and more so, it is a hard emotional concept to discuss. Few researchers willingly put themselves into this political crossfire. Open debate, founded on credible, academic research, is what is needed to come to terms with a Cold War past. Manichean worldviews of East vs West, while attractive, can support polarization.

In adding to Aunesluoma's argument, I believe we need a better understanding of how remembering, as well as forgetting, influences Finnish foreign policy debates. How a Cold War past is remembered, as well as forgotten, is an attempt to shape the current political moment. This is important in understanding how the parameters of contemporary foreign policy debate are managed.

This is not unique to Finland. As shown, hard emotions also influence American foreign policy history. However, due to Finland's progressive archival system, decision-makers have less influence in hiding the past, though they can still try.

Historians thus have an unprecedented opportunity to develop contemporary Finnish foreign policy debate. History is considered a fundamental piece of foreign policy. Henry Kissinger argued that history was the most important subject any decision-maker could study. I believe historians can play a role in regulating foreign policy debates, and also motivating the public to engage in the present via the past.

History does not necessarily offer lessons or regularities, but rather, teaches us about possibilities. The past, according to Philip Zelikow, should be used to provoke curiosity in policy debates.[22] This is something many policymakers have noted is lacking in contemporary discussions on the future of European security. For example, debates from the 1990s on constructing a multi-institutional approach to European security, are debates many policymakers are only rediscovering now. Forgetting these past visions leaves us a step behind in creatively debating policy futures.

The Finnish Institute of International Affairs' new director Hiski Haukkala noted on *Yle* last month that in his opinion, Finland's approach to peace in Ukraine has been morally correct, but unrealistic.[23] This is a profound contribution to how we discuss Finnish foreign policy post-2022. In particular, it invites debate on a topic Finnish society has not wanted to entertain. What type of victory in Ukraine is plausible? This debate requires substantial critique of Ukrainian, American, and EU policy, as well as Finnish policy itself. Victory, just like peace, cannot be simply spoken into existence. Victory, as well as peace, requires a long-term strategy, and a multi-institutional approach. In my opinion, this includes constructing a strategy on Russia that is proactive, though founded on deterrence.

In reaffirming the positive contribution of contemporary history Aunesluoma states:

> Increased understanding, knowledge and arguments about our own recent past will broaden the possibilities for political action and strengthen democracy. By relating the present to the past, the history of our own time expands what can be considered politically possible in the present.[24]

I would underline this point by saying this must be done by discussing multiple, credible, and sometimes contentious, pasts. Societies should remain critical of any past that is politically advantageous to any one group of political actors.

As an oral historian as well as an international historian, I believe that meaning is made through ongoing interpretation. This requires a commitment to ongoing discussion. This monograph is by no means a final word. I only hope it will be an inspiration for continued debate, and most of all, critical commentary.

References

1 Reynolds 2024a.
2 Reynolds 2024c.
3 Reynolds 2021.
4 The term 'newly independent states' is used here to denote the former republics of the U.S.S.R. that gained independence out of the Soviet collapse. This includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. However, this definition differs from the U.S. State Department's definition, which left the Baltic republics out, as Newly Independent States was used as an administrative delineation to conform to the Commonwealth of Independent States grouping. This did not include Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. See: Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, "History of the Department of State During the Clinton Presidency (1993-2001)", https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/pubs/8527.htm.
5 Starr 1997, 25.
6 Hill 2018; Clinton 1997; Bureau of European and Canadian Affairs l997.
7 Blank 1995, 77.
8 Jakobson 1998, xiii.
9 Haukkala & Ojanen 2011, 150.
10 Pölhö 1995.
11 Nyberg 1995.
12 Ovaska 2023a, 161; Ovaska 2023b.
13 Ulkoasianvaliokunta 2024, 6.
14 In January 2025, Ambassador Hakala was appointed as Special Envoy of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office: https://valtioneuvosto.fi/en/-/special-representatives-of-the-osce-chairperson-in-office-in-2025.
15 See for example, the programme for the Finnish 2025 Chairpersonship, published in January 2025: https://um.fi/documents/35732/0/Finland%27s+Programme+for+OSCE+Chairpersonship+2025+%281%29.pdf/e994685e-ea6d-25fe-ab0c-d30dfdadc08d?t=1736410765333; Reynolds 2024b.
16 Chollet 1997.
17 Pickering 1996.
18 Grossman 1996; Interview Presel 2022.

19 Talbott 2002.
20 Talbott 2016.
21 Aunesluoma 1998, 106.
22 Zelikow 2015.
23 Din Belle 2024.
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