



**Final Research Report**  
**Visegrad-OSA Fellowship**  
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Project: Universalism vs. Particularism in the transnational civil society of human rights organizations: The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights between cooperation and competition (1982–2007)

**Research objectives**

My stay as a Visegrad-OSA fellow fits in my PhD research entitled '*Universalism vs. Particularism in the transnational civil society of human rights organizations: The International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights between cooperation and competition (1982–2007)*'. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed a surge in the number of human rights NGO, we should wonder how this affects the daily practice of human rights promotion. As any other organization, human rights NGOs have to strive for resources to strive for their goals. Literature on human rights NGOs, however, has neglected this daily practice of acquiring resources. They focus on the role human rights NGOs play in opposition to the state emphasizing cooperation, principles and morality as important features of human rights NGOs. Yet, there are still blind spots in our understanding of the relations between these organizations. If we want to get a grip on the complexity of human rights issues in a globalized world, it is vital that we include the relations between HROs in our research focus as well. To get a grasp on the history of human rights, therefore, human rights research should take into account the internal and external conflicts of HROs. Therefore, I try to answer the question how human rights NGOs have handled the tension between the promotion of universal human rights on the one hand and the daily struggle for resources on the other hand.



Initially my focus was on the relations between Amnesty International USA and Human Rights Watch. Both have their records deposited in the Center for Human Rights Documentation and Research (CHRDR) at Columbia University. Because of methodological and heuristical problems, however, I had to change the case studies. First, Human Rights Watch denied access to crucial documents, especially minutes of meetings and correspondence files. Secondly, looking head on at the relations between Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch distorts the analysis as everything would be interpreted in the light of these relations. As if every decision had something to do with the other organization and thereby neglecting other factors (other NGOs, foundations, government, media, personal, ...). While I was going through the archives of Human Rights Watch I came across the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHF). I did not know the IHF before, however, the records of Human Rights Watch at the CHRDR contain an entire series about the federation. It turned out that the IHF was an initiative of Helsinki Watch, the first of the 5 Watch committee that later became Human Rights Watch.

Established in 1982, the goal of the IHF was to promote human rights and to develop into a federation with national sections in every signatory country of the Helsinki Final Act (1975). Both the fact that the development of national sections did not go as smoothly as anticipated and the bankruptcy of the federation in 2007, reveal the existence of struggles within and outside the federation.

The records of the IHF secretariat are kept by the Open Society Archives in Budapest. Initially, the size and the content of the records were not clear. To prospect the material I have visited the OSA for 3 days in June 2012. The accessible material at that time encompassed the period 1982 – mid 1995. This made me conclude that a comparative study with Human Rights Watch, AIUSA and the IHF for the 1980s and 1990s would be workable. For this purpose I stayed in Budapest for a month in October - November 2012. During this visit it was made clear that, although the finding aid was still in preparation, the OSA holds the entire archive of the IHF, encompassing the period 1982-2007. Both the history of the IHF and its records at the OSA imposed a change of course. The IHF became my only case study.

### **Visegrad fellowship objectives**

A new and longer consultation of the IHF records was necessary and this was made possible thanks to a Visegrad-OSA grant. From March 18 to May 17, 2013 I stayed at the OSA as a Visegrad fellow. Although the finding aid was still in preparation (since May 17 the finding aid is accessible online), I was able to request any box I needed by using the internal



database. As I am interested in the daily practice of the IHF I consulted material that gave information on the federation's goals, decision making, funding, relations between national committees and the secretariat, and relations among national committees.

The most obvious series to consult are, therefore, the 'Administrative Files', 'Files of the Executive Director' and 'Correspondence and Memoranda'. With regard to both the administrative and the executive director files, the goal was to go exhaustively through the material. The 'Correspondence and Memoranda' series was consulted selectively, using the descriptions in the internal database.

During my stay I examined a total of 51 boxes and 180 reports, and took approx. 6000 pictures. I was most interested in documents that gave insight into the functioning of the IHF. Especially minutes of executive committee and assembly meetings are crucial, but also correspondence among national Helsinki committees and between the committees and the secretariat, correspondence with governmental institutions and with funders. The files of the executive directors proved to be the most informative.

Beside archival research I also contributed to the OSA by sharing my experience of and pointing to possible improvements of the new finding aid of the IHF. I was also asked to test the Parallel Archive and to share my thoughts about it. On April 30 I presented my research and shared my experience as a Visegrad fellow during an informal public meeting with the OSA community.

### **Preliminary findings**

The gathered data needs to be processed further to make statements on the IHF. But based on what I have found during my stay I can say that the development of the IHF was discontinuous. This counters the notion of principled and horizontal human rights activism. The IHF witnessed internal and external struggles. For instance, the goal of the IHF was to establish a national affiliation in every signatory country of the Helsinki Act. However, that turned out harder than expected. There was never a Belgian or an Irish affiliation of the IHF, to name just a few examples. Also, the federation was very uneven in terms of professionalism, funding or thematic and geographical focus. Committees from the East complained that the Western committees did too little to report on human rights problems in their own country.

Funding was the Achilles heel of the IHF. Not just at the end, when it had to file for bankruptcy due to financial fraud, but through its entire existence. It had to scratch for every



penny. In the beginning the IHF was totally dependent of the Ford Foundation. After the Cold War the Ford Foundation forced the IHF to reorient if it wanted to get a new grant. These little examples show how principles and interests have to coincide for human rights promotion to happen.

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