



# HELSINKI COMMISSION DIGEST

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## ANNUAL OSCE HUMAN RIGHTS MEETING DOMINATED BY RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

*How important was the annual OSCE human dimension meeting?  
You can tell by how hard Russia worked to undermine it.*

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Representatives of governments and civil society from OSCE participating States met in Warsaw, Poland, from September 22 to October 3, 2014 for the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM). The meeting was organized by the OSCE office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) under the leadership of its newly-appointed Director Michael Link.

This year's annual OSCE human dimension implementation meeting drew 1,225 participants from 53 countries, including 700 NGOs. There were an unprecedented 82 side events on specific countries or issues. The session on tolerance and nondiscrimination was the most oversubscribed of the three-hour sessions with 85 people vying for the speaker's list.

Other specific topics for HDIM sessions included violence against women, rights of migrants and right of national minorities.

In 2014, for the first time in over a decade, all sessions of the entire two-week conference were webcast live. Video of the events can be viewed at [www.ustream.tv/channel/hdim-2014](http://www.ustream.tv/channel/hdim-2014). The texts of U.S. statements are attached.

### About the U.S. HDIM Delegation

The U.S. Delegation was headed by J. Brian Atwood, former USAID Director and current Professor of Public Policy at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, the University of Minnesota.

Head of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, Ambassador Daniel Baer, also participated, as did Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Thomas O. Melia. Helsinki Commission Chief of Staff Ambassador David Killion and other Commission staff participated in all aspects of the delegation's work and HDIM plenary and side events.

## Russia Takes Propaganda Campaign to Warsaw

The 2014 HDIM was overshadowed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its violations of each of the Helsinki Final Act Decalogue principles.

The Russian Government undertook considerable effort to use the HDIM to deflect criticism of its actions in Ukraine by unleashing blistering attacks on the Baltic States, the United States and of course on Ukraine itself. Overall, Russia's engagement in HDIM reflected the importance it attaches to the meeting and its understanding of the meeting's potential to shape opinion.

Moscow carefully orchestrated the participation of a large number of GONGOs (governmentally organized non-governmental organizations), whose representatives used their speaking time in plenary sessions and side events to echo Russia's alternate reality. Moreover, for the first time at an HDIM, Russia's leading propaganda news agency, Russia Today, made an appearance to film and participate in some of the proceedings.

Nevertheless, Russia's narratives were consistently challenged. For example, the Ukrainian delegate's extemporaneous and stinging rejection of Russia's use of the phrase "brotherly country of Ukraine" can be watched during the closing session here at 52:11 minutes: <http://www.ustream.tv/recorded/53512330>. In addition, Freedom House, the United States, Canada, Sweden and Lithuania convened a special event focused on Russian state propaganda related to the situation in Ukraine. Countries that sometimes carry water for Moscow were noticeably silent at the HDIM regarding Ukraine.

In at least one instance, Russia may have overplayed its propaganda hand. Not content to use HDIM meeting space allocated for side events, the Russian Embassy rented a small lobby alcove in the Hotel Victoria conference site for a counterfactual exhibit regarding a murdered Ukrainian journalist. The hotel's decision to lease the space led one of Poland's leading dailies, Gazeta Wyborcza, to run a scathing editorial under the headline, "Scandal in the Victoria."

Worse still for the Russians, the hotel felt compelled to place a disclaimer directly in front of the exhibit stating that the hotel was not responsible for any "defamation, omission or inaccuracy."

## OSCE Ambassadors Visit Auschwitz

Launching the 2014 Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), Ambassador Baer led a study tour of eight OSCE ambassadors to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Ambassador Alexa Wessner, U.S. Ambassador to Austria, Head of Delegation Atwood, and Ambassador Killion also participated, joined by a senior representative of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

The study visit was modeled on previous Helsinki Commission visits to Auschwitz organized in connection with the HDIM and was the first time that OSCE Ambassadors, as a group, made the trip together. January 27, 2015, will mark the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the study trip provided an important lens for understanding the human dimension work of the OSCE.



Norwegian and German Ambassadors lay a wreath on behalf of OSCE Representatives

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## Civil Society Speaks Up

HDIM remains the rare international convocation that brings together government officials and representatives of civil society from participating States. NGOs, members of the media, national minorities and persons who themselves have suffered as a result of governments' failure to abide by human rights commitments are all present and have the opportunity to outline their concerns, their difficulties and their proposals on how their countries can better meet their human dimension commitments.

In 2014, 82 side events, more than ever were held in addition to the formal sessions. Victims of political imprisonment and torture, and the relatives of persons who have in some cases disappeared or lost their lives in the struggle against oppression in Belarus, Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan detailed the abuses they have suffered. As in years past, courageous human rights defenders from Central Asia and the Caucasus bore witness to the stress under which civil society functions in their countries. Activists from Azerbaijan spoke of the government's imprisonment of journalists and how it has forced into exile or silenced prominent political actors.

Kazakhstan, with its own 2010 Chairmanship of the OSCE in the rearview mirror, was largely absent from the meeting, as were previously numerous Kazakhstani GONGOs. As in previous years, the United States made a special statement concerning the use of the OSCE Moscow Mechanism against Turkmenistan in 2003 (raising the disappearance in prison of several persons arrested at that time) and Belarus in 2011 (following the December 2010, post-election crackdown). Other side events also addressed issues being confronted by Roma, protection for human rights defenders and protections for trafficked persons.

Attention was not just on Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. For the first time at an HDIM, Hungarian NGOs organized a side event focused on the deteriorating situation in the country, concluding that the erosion of human rights and democracy in Hungary had reached such a level that "the system can no longer be changed within the system." These concerns were echoed by many others, beginning with the keynote address by Human Rights First's Elisa Massimino.

Throughout the HDIM, an overarching issue was the need for governments to provide civil society, media and political parties in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and even Hungary with the breathing room to function and to play the constructive role they can and want to play in improving life for all their country's people.



*More Freedom, Please: Representatives from the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Transparency International, the Eötvös Károly Policy Institute, and Hungarian Civil Liberties Union*



*Activists hold silent protests wearing t-shirts with the photos of imprisoned Azerbaijani activists Leyla Yunus, Rasul Jafarov, Intigam Aliyev, and Emin Huseynov*

## About the U.S. Helsinki Commission

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, is an independent agency of the Federal Government charged with monitoring compliance with the Helsinki Accords and advancing comprehensive security through promotion of human rights, democracy, and economic, environmental and military cooperation in 57 countries.

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