



Statement of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
hearing on
“The Role of OSCE Institutions in Advancing Human Rights and Democracy”

September 17, 2008

I am pleased to convene this hearing of the Helsinki Commission focused on two important OSCE institutions which share a common mission of advancing human rights and democracy through the OSCE region, now encompassing 56 countries. For those Americans familiar with the Helsinki Accords, perhaps the image that comes first to mind is of the Soviet Gulag and the persecution of courageous individuals like Andrei Sakharov or the plight of refuseniks denied their right to emigrate. Indeed, the human dimension, as it is called, is the human face of the Helsinki Process for many.

There is no question that the power of the ideas enshrined in the Helsinki Final Act shook an empire and helped topple dictatorships, ushering in new opportunities for hundreds of millions of people throughout Eurasia to enjoy freedoms long denied them. At the same time, the process of overcoming the legacy of the past has not been without its own costs.

It would have been unimaginable back in 1975, the year that historic document was signed, to think that a mere fifteen years later the leaders of the participating States would commit “to build, consolidate and strengthen democracy as the only system of government of our nations.” The challenge for each of our countries is to translate such lofty pronouncements into practical action.

Agreement was reached back in 1990 to create specialized institutions to assist the participating States in this process. Based on a U.S. proposal, the then Office of Free Elections was established in Warsaw and later expanded to encompass human rights under the title, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, as it is known today. Similarly, the United States urged that creation of a parliamentary dimension for the Helsinki Process in recognition of the unique contribution that elected parliamentarians could play in advancing the aims of Helsinki. I would point out that one of my predecessors, the late Congressman Dante Facsell, and another chair of the Commission, Steny Hoyer, played an active role in the negotiations that led to the establishment of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, based in Copenhagen. I had the privilege of serving as President of the Assembly from 2004 to 2006.

While distinct, these two OSCE institutions do share an overlapping mission to advance human rights and democracy. Indeed, in many ways their roles are complementary and their efforts strengthened to the extent that they work cooperatively. This point is particularly critical in the current environment in which some participating States, notably Russia, appear intent on undermining the OSCE's human rights and democracy promoting work.

Events in recent weeks in Georgia should serve as a stark reminder that there is much work that needs to be done if we are truly to overcome the legacy of the past. These and other challenges will require strong U.S. leadership from the incoming administration, if the OSCE and its institutions, including those represented here today, are to fulfill their mission of advancing human rights and democracy.