

**Statement by Senator Benjamin L. Cardin
Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**“Promises to Keep: Kazakhstan’s 2010 OSCE
Chairmanship”**

July 22, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this important hearing. I was very pleased to travel with you and our other colleagues to Kazakhstan for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly’s Annual Meeting. It was my first time in that country and in light of Kazakhstan’s upcoming chairmanship of the OSCE, it was certainly timely.

Astana’s record on human rights and democratization does indeed raise concerns. The State Department’s yearly reports, as well as those by numerous human rights groups inside and outside of Kazakhstan, lay out in detail the problem areas.

For example, Kazakhstan has yet to hold an election that meets OSCE norms. The 2007 election produced a legislature composed exclusively of President Nazarbaev's party, the first post- independence parliament with no opposition lawmakers. Some opposition figures and journalists have been murdered or have died under suspicious circumstances. There remain serious concerns about freedom of association, assembly and conscience.

Washington, London and some other capitals were understandably reluctant to back Astana's bid to chair the OSCE, an organization with a defining human rights profile. Foreign Minister's Tazhin's statement in Madrid about planned reforms was a critical factor in convincing countries that were opposed or wavering to take a leap of faith and support Kazakhstan's OSCE aspirations.

President Nazarbaev himself repeated the commitment to political reform in a speech to OSCE Parliamentarians. For that reason, the most striking moment of the trip for me came less than an hour after that same speech when we met with the President privately. Responding to a question about the tempo of political reform in Kazakhstan, he said that his country “cannot move faster than his giant neighbors Russia and China.”

Frankly, I found that statement quite sobering: China, after all, is still run by the Communist Party and lacks even the most fundamental rights embraced by the OSCE such as a democratic system, freedom of the media and freedom of assembly. Russia, despite its formal political pluralism, is for all practical purposes run by the Kremlin through highly centralized lines of authority. A few months ago, presidential power was transferred from Vladimir Putin to Dmitry Medvedev in a carefully orchestrated exercise. But the executive branch still dominates all other branches of government. Information, especially on the airwaves, is tightly controlled and journalists who try to expose the rampant corruption or other official abuses literally risk their lives.

So when the President of Kazakhstan argues that his country cannot reform faster than Russia and China, I wonder what to make of Kazakhstan's commitment to political reform. Freedom House, which testified at our hearing last October, has completed a comprehensive analysis of Kazakhstan's progress on implementation, issue by issue. So far, the record is not very encouraging. Human Rights Watch has come to similar conclusions.

What is certain, Mr. Chairman is that only a year and a half remains before Kazakhstan takes over the chairmanship of the OSCE – not a very long time to make the many needed, and promised, reforms. I look forward to hearing the perspective of our witnesses on where matters stand today and how Kazakhstan can meet these commitments in the appropriate time frame.