



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on

**SLOVAKIA'S CHAIRMANSHIP OF THE OSCE:
PRIORITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Wednesday, April 3, 2019

3:30 p.m.

Capitol Visitor Center

Room SVC 201-00

Opening Statement of Senator Benjamin L. Cardin

Mr. Hastings, thank you for convening today's Helsinki Commission hearing with the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Miroslav Lajčák, thus continuing our tradition of inviting the OSCE's most senior political representative to be heard in Washington.

Minister Lajčák, we are honored to have you here and welcome your leadership of the world's largest regional security organization.

The OSCE's main purpose is fostering peace in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian spaces through a comprehensive approach to security. We believe this institution continues to play an important role in working towards this goal.

However, our common security is under continued challenge by Russia's contempt for the international order. Trust is damaged when one country blatantly violates international law. The OSCE's crisis response capacity is critical in responding to security concerns arising when OSCE commitments are blatantly ignored, such as Russia's aggression in Ukraine and Georgia.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been at the center of the OSCE's focus for four years now. I welcome your strong commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and look forward to hearing your views on this singular challenge within the OSCE region and especially your assessment of efforts to reach a solution that would restore Ukraine's full control over its own territory.

Human rights and democracy are the beating heart of the Helsinki process and it is critical that we preserve the ability of civil society to participate fully in its meetings and work. While I am deeply concerned about the erosion of democratic norms in some parts of the OSCE, it is important that we support, amplify, and replicate positive developments where we can.

In Armenia, the nonviolent popular mobilization, free and fair elections, and political transition in the past year are causes for optimism in the post-Soviet space. The Armenian experience speaks to the critical role that civil society and respect for fundamental freedoms play in generating peaceful and popular democratic change. This historic evolution in Armenia richly deserves the support of the United States and international community, including organizations such as the OSCE. We are also interested in significant opportunities for positive human rights developments in Uzbekistan.

I commend Slovakia for convening a conference on anti-Semitism in February and appreciate the opportunity to share a message with that meeting in my role as OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Special Representative on Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Intolerance. I understand the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting that took place this week in Vienna focused on religious intolerance generally, and that future events will focus on Roma. Given the recent tragedy in New Zealand targeting Muslims, and a continuing escalation in hate crimes and discrimination towards refugees and migrants, it is important that we also act following these events. It is one reason I called upon OSCE Parliamentarians to join me this year in reporting on efforts they and their governments have engaged to in to stem the tide of hate in their countries. As we have seen, unchecked hate knows no bounds. I would be honored if we could work together on an OSCE Anti-Discrimination and Inclusion Action Plan that highlights government efforts and builds coalitions across all our communities to address hate, as no community should have to go it alone in this fight.

Mr. Foreign Minister, it has been 30 years since the Velvet Revolution. I made my first trip with the Helsinki Commission in 1987, going with then Chairman Congressman Steny Hoyer to the historic Vienna Follow-up Meeting and then to German Democratic Republic. The changes we have seen in the last 30 years – in democracy, prosperity, and security – were truly inconceivable in 1987. The goal today is to preserve and expand those achievements and I look forward to working with you towards that goal.