



Statement by the Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin
Chairman, Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing on “Promoting Tolerance and Understanding in the OSCE Region:
The Role of the Personal Representatives”
October 14, 2009

Today the Helsinki Commission meets to consider the phenomenon of intolerance in the countries of Eurasia and North America, comprising the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is fitting that the Commission serve as the venue for this public hearing with these experts as it was here that Members of Congress first pressed for OSCE engagement in the face of escalating anti-Semitism and related violence that gripped many participating States, including the United States, earlier this decade. Indeed, much of the OSCE’s work in this field has been undertaken in response to initiatives by Commissioners pursued through the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

Over the years we have witnessed a resurgence of various forms of intolerance and discrimination in the OSCE countries. Concerns over these developments prompted the participating States in late 2004 to establish mechanisms for monitoring these trends throughout the OSCE region. At the same time agreement was reached for the designation of three experts, with distinct mandates, to work proactively at the direction of the OSCE Chair-in-Office. The personal representatives on tolerance were to enhance the visibility of OSCE efforts to combat intolerance, aided by their ability to tap into the highest political level of the organization through its chairmanship.

The work of the three personal representatives has taken on heightened urgency as we face the worst global economic downturn since the end of World War II, a situation that only contributes further to the vilification of certain individuals in society because of their race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic or other status. This is exemplified in our own country by a forty percent increase in hate crimes targeting persons perceived to be immigrants, in part fueled by anti-immigrant political sentiments and a more than fifty percent increase in hate groups.

The dangers of not addressing intolerance and discrimination were disturbingly highlighted by the recent murder of an African-American security guard at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC by a White supremacist. I personally have been engaged in efforts to address these negative trends by working to strengthen hate crimes and anti-discrimination laws in Congress.

In recent years, the participating States have agreed to numerous commitments aimed at combating intolerance and promoting understanding. Additionally, in the historic 2004 Berlin Declaration, the participating States declared “unambiguously that international developments or political issues, including those in Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East, never justify anti-Semitism.”

In the OSCE region and beyond, outlandish and irresponsible articles alleging that Israelis have been engaged in organ harvesting continue to appear in print, reminiscent of Soviet disinformation campaigns of the Cold War era aimed at fomenting anti-American sentiment. ADL's report on attitudes toward Jews in seven European countries released earlier this year was most revealing. Spain, a country featuring prominently in that report, is one of the countries visited by Rabbi Baker in his capacity as the personal representative on combating anti-Semitism.

I look forward to his observations on developments there and elsewhere in the OSCE region and learning more about the activities of Ambassador Akhmetov and Mr. Mauro within the context of their respective mandates.