



Statement of the Honorable Benjamin L. Cardin, Co-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 welcome this opportunity to examine the ongoing work of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, two institutions at the forefront of efforts to further respect for human rights and contribute to the building and consolidation of democracy in the participating States. My own involvement in this work dates back to the dark days of the Soviet era when tens of thousands of Jews in the U.S.S.R. were denied the possibility of emigrating to Israel or elsewhere. Anatoly Scharansky, one of the founding members of the Moscow Helsinki Group, helped draw attention to their plight and paid a great personal price for his advocacy on behalf of Soviet Jewry.

The historic events of the late 1980's and early 1990's culminating in the fall of the Berlin Wall and ultimately in the collapse of the Soviet Union opened the door for individuals and nations to chart their own futures. These developments were seen as triumphs, not of one alliance over another, but of ideas and the human spirit.

I have stood at the foot of the Brandenburg Gate, once the symbol of a divided city, country and continent, and witnessed firsthand the positive impact of those events. More recently, I have walked along Independence Square in the center of Kyiv and seen the transformation of that country following the Orange Revolution.

Despite these and other advances, the reality is that many challenges remain if the promises of Helsinki are to be enjoyed by all. Recent Commission hearings on developments in Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Belarus as well as the rise of racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of intolerance are reminders of some of our unfinished work.

The OSCE's comprehensive framework – encompassing the security, economic and human dimensions – makes it uniquely suited to help meet these challenges. Engagement and dialogue can be important vehicles for bringing about change and greater adherence to the common commitments agreed to by all participating States on the basis of consensus. The Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, in which I serve as a Vice President, can and should serve as catalysts for advancing human rights and democracy throughout the OSCE region.

I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses this afternoon and thank you, Mr. Chairman, for convening this hearing.