

Statement of Chairman Sam Brownback
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing on
“Advancing the Human Dimension in the OSCE:
The Role of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights”
May 17, 2006

The hearing is called to order.

I would like my full statement to be part of the record.

At the outset, I want to acknowledge the strong bipartisan support for the important contributions the ODIHR has made over the past 15 years. It has been at the forefront of everything from developing internationally-accepted election observation standards to assisting newly independent states to combating anti-Semitism.

Developments in the OSCE region over this period, including the dramatic expansion of the OSCE membership from 35 countries to the present 55, present new opportunities as well as challenges.

Today, the ODIHR faces serious challenges instigated by the Russian Federation, Belarus and a small minority of the OSCE participating states seeking to undermine the organization under the guise of reform.

Holding ODIHR’s modest budget hostage is but one of their efforts to hamper activities that are not only fully consistent with the aims of the Helsinki Final Act but the universal principles of each and every human being demanding to live free and productive lives.

Let me add here that I strongly support and welcome the President’s proclamation yesterday imposing travel sanctions on members of the Belarusian government. My Co-Chairman, Mr. Smith, has been at the forefront of shedding light on the abysmal human rights record of that country beginning with his bill, the Belarus Democracy Act, and I would like to commend him and other members of the Commission for their years of persistent work that led to this recent action by the President. I’m pleased to see that the EU and the US are coordinating a consistent policy towards Belarus.

This Commission, and the U.S. Congress and State Department, have worked with and supported the ODIHR since its inception and we will continue to do so.

Over the years the ODIHR has earned an international reputation for its leadership, professionalism, and excellence in the critical area of election observation. That being said, ODIHR’s mission is much broader, encompassing a wide range of human rights activities aimed at closing the gap between commitments on paper and the reality on the ground in signatory countries.

I would cite as one example – among many others – the training seminars for defense lawyers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan on issues such as legal skills and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

But that mission must be sustained whenever possible by domestic stakeholders, those who have a vested stake in the development of democracy in their own country. No matter how much ODIHR as an institution may be committed to democracy and regardless of how much its budget, there is no substitute for even one committed Belarusian or a Kazak or a Tajik who believes in democracy and freedom. ODIHR must constantly work to create the necessary political space for these people and others to continue their work and to fill that space. After all, these are the people who will stay behind and continue to fight after all the reporters and the cameras and the international election observers are gone.

These are precisely the kinds of initiatives that complement the aims of the Silk Road Strategy Act I originally introduced in 1999 which was recently updated and expanded. Silk Road II or S. 2749 supports the economic and political independence of the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus, a region vital to the interest of the United States and one that deserves more, not less attention, from ODIHR.

The OSCE and the Helsinki process should be a vehicle for bringing about peaceful change through implementation of the consensus commitments agreed to by all participating States. The reality is that some OSCE countries would not sign on today to provisions they willingly accepted over a decade ago. That does not mean we should tamper with the fundamental commitments that serve as the foundation of OSCE: democratic governance, respect for the rights and dignity of the individual, and development of society based on the rule of law.

In fact, there are a number of people who are keenly interested in this hearing. They are human rights lawyers from China and they recently met with the President at Camp David to discuss not only the need to press for freedoms in China we take for granted here in the United States and in the West, but they also raised with the State Department and with me as well, the need for a similar Helsinki framework for Asia.

That says a great deal about what the Helsinki process means and how enduring the power of ideas are. I also know that one of our witnesses, Carl Gershman, has been very active in trying to promote such a framework in Northeast Asia, especially as a way to bring greater attention to human rights in North Korea and to find a way out of the morass of the Six-Party talks.

I look forward to a vigorous and productive discussion.