



U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION

Briefing

Combating Hate Crimes and Discrimination in the OSCE

The Honorable Alcee Hastings

Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission

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Good morning, ladies and gentleman. Thank you for your interest in this morning's briefing on combating hate crimes and discrimination within the OSCE. I want to start by welcoming my colleagues on the Commission Senator Gordon Smith, who with Senator Kennedy has led efforts in the Senate to make U.S. hate crimes laws more inclusive and Representative Hilda Solis, who is also the Special Representative on Migration for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly.

As we approach the anniversary of Kristallnacht, a night of historic violence against Jews in Germany and Austria, it is incumbent upon us to recall what can happen when intolerance and discrimination within a society are not addressed. Thus we are all rightly moved when we see images such as those displayed on the table outside or read media reports about:

- an African asylum seeker being attacked with a chainsaw in Switzerland,
- a video purporting to show the beheading of two men in Russia under a Nazi flag,
- a German mob attack on eight Indians during a street festival,
- the release of a Spanish man who physically attacked an Ecuadorian girl in the subway,
- anti-Muslim rallies throughout Europe,
- the vandalizing of Jewish graves in various countries,

and, unfortunately I could go on. Not only are hate crimes in the OSCE on the rise, but discrimination is also an everyday experience for many persons who live in OSCE countries, as many Roma and other minorities of Turkish, African, south Asian, or other descent can attest to when they attempt to apply for jobs, find housing, or even go to school.

Politicians and political parties are also increasingly adopting anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric without receiving proper condemnation from their colleagues or other public leaders. While censorship is not the answer, political leaders do bear a unique responsibility to promote tolerance and mutual respect amongst its citizenry, not to sow mistrust and discord.

This is the reason that I and my colleague Congressman Mark Kirk have responded so swiftly in leading Congressional efforts to condemn the anti-Semitic remarks of the Belarusian President.

Some years ago I, my co-Chairman Senator Cardin and other Commissioners came together to push for the OSCE to begin to address tolerance issues following a spike in anti-Semitic incidents taking place in Europe. This resulted in a series of initiatives that began with a focus on anti-Semitism and went on to include racism and xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions.

Now, five years later, the OSCE has an established tolerance unit that publishes an annual hate crimes report, trains law enforcement on responding to hate crimes, and has developed numerous tolerance education initiatives. Summaries of the OSCE annual hate crimes report are available outside.

We are also committed to continuing our focus on these issues within our own country. The current reluctance of this Congress to expand hate crimes laws to include gay and other vulnerable groups says that we too have a ways to go in protecting the fundamental rights of the most vulnerable in our society.

While this briefing focuses on the situation overseas, it is the first of several initiatives we are planning to bring attention to intolerance and discrimination throughout the OSCE region with the goal of having constructive conversations on how to best combat these problems.

To kick off events this Congress, we are honored to have three distinguished guests here today. While my staff has made their biographies, reports and other information from their agencies available outside, I would like to take a few minutes to introduce our guests.

First I would like to introduce UN Special Rapporteur Dou Dou Diene, who has made a special trip from overseas to be here today. In addition to conducting reports on the state of race relations in Russia and Switzerland and a recent trip to the Baltics, I understand that he has also received an invitation to prepare a report on the United States.

Given the voter disenfranchisement in my own state of Florida, over 159 reports of anti-Semitic incidents in my district last year, and the racial inequalities in our justice system revealed by the Jena 6 case, Katrina victims, reintroduction of the "noose," and the list goes on . . . I'd say the Special Rapporteur has a lot of work ahead of him and hope that he will agree to join us in the future to share his final report on the United States.

I would also like to welcome Dr. Tiffany Lightbourn. An expert on prejudice and discrimination and immigrant communities, who is joining us from the Science and Technology Directorate of the Department of Homeland Security. In a post 9/11 world, she can tell us how tolerance issues are also relevant to security in the OSCE.

I would also like to introduce Mr. Naftalin and Mr. Butkevich, whose organization the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews has been a pioneer in this field and publishes the "Bigotry Monitor," an outstanding resource for the human rights and policy community on issues of anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance in the former Soviet region.

Lastly, I would like to note that we also extended an invitation to both Human Rights First and the SOVA Center in Russia. As many of you well know, Human Rights First has published a report on hate crimes in Europe and the SOVA Center has taken on the difficult but much needed task of collecting statistics on hate crimes in Russia and monitoring the responses of law enforcement and the government. While they unfortunately could not be here today, we hope to have them at future events, as much of our work on the Commission on these issues could not be done without them.

Thank you.