

Senator, congratulations on your appointment as Chairman of the Helsinki Commission and on your chairing this important first hearing of the 109th Congress. I look forward to working with you as we press for change – press for full implementation of Helsinki commitments, especially those relating to human rights, democratic institutions and justice. Today I join the Chairman in welcoming the Chair-in-Office, Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel.

Dr. Rupel, the Commission has benefited greatly from interaction with your Ambassador to the United States, Samuel Zbogar, and the Slovenian Ambassador to the OSCE, Janez Lenarcic, whom I met with while in Vienna the week before last. The Commission appreciates the day-to-day contact with representatives of your fine diplomatic corps both here and in Vienna.

I share the deep concern already expressed about efforts by the Russian Federation to cripple the OSCE. As President Bush said at his Bratislava press conference with President Putin, “[Democracies] have a rule of law and [provide] protection of minorities, a free press and a viable political opposition.” The essentials of free and fair elections, based on OSCE commitments, must continue to support the will of the people and not the interests of those seeking to maintain their self-enriching hold on power. Frankly, many of us are very concerned about the OSCE undertaking a review of current election standards at the request of countries clearly not interested in a free press or a viable opposition.

The conflict in Chechnya continues, and we face the threat of conflict in Kosovo. On Chechnya, we share the contempt for those in the Chechen resistance who have resorted to cowardly acts of terrorism against innocent persons. By withholding consensus to the OSCE permanent mission in Chechnya, however, Moscow has only raised questions about its own responsibility for the situation there and its desire to find real solutions that respect human rights. The recent denial of consensus by Russia to OSCE border monitoring in Georgia similarly raises questions about Russia’s commitment to building confidence in the security of participating States.

Mr. Chairman, I would hope the failure of the recent elections in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to meet OSCE election standards does not calm the new wave of democratic change we witnessed most recently in the peaceful, public protests of the Orange Revolution. Instead, the OSCE must penetrate its deep roots on the side of democratic rule and reach out to those seeking such change. As Chair-in-Office, Dr. Rupel, you have an opportunity to lead in this way.

Elsewhere, Dr. Rupel, you have highlighted your concerns about the risks in Kosovo this year and their implications for much of southeastern Europe in which the OSCE has invested significant time and resources. I welcome your unique perspective from the region. Again, I advocate upholding OSCE standards in Kosovo, regardless of status. We need to see much more progress in the return process, in freedom of movement and in opportunity for cooperation across ethnic lines.

While I have thus far focused on threats to security and cooperation in specific regions and countries deserve close scrutiny, let me conclude by stressing the extreme importance I attach to OSCE efforts on issues relevant to many countries, east and west and including the United States. I look forward to the time for discussion about human trafficking, the many manifestations of intolerance, particularly anti-Semitism, and the ongoing threats to religious freedom in many OSCE States.

Thank you for your participation in the Commission's hearing today.