



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Christopher H. Smith

Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mr. Chairman, I welcome the opportunity to discuss the vitally important work of the OSCE and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) in advancing the aims of the Helsinki Final Act – promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Indeed, the OSCE provides an ideal framework for advancing U.S. interests in the participating States, including the Administration’s freedom agenda. Not surprisingly, some OSCE countries have become increasingly hostile to the organization’s human rights work aimed at bringing about peaceful democratic change in keeping with the commitments all OSCE countries have accepted. This hostility comes from anti-democratic regimes more interested in maintaining power through rigged elections and worse than respecting the political rights of their citizens.

Given the subject matter of this hearing, I must say that I am confounded that some at the State Department are entertaining the idea of agreeing to allow Kazakhstan to assume the political leadership of the OSCE in 2009, a decision that will have to be taken by consensus soon. Agreeing to Kazakhstan’s bid would be the equivalent of allowing egregious rights violators to hijack UN human rights bodies – something many on this Commission have fought in that context. Kazakhstan is increasingly allying itself at the OSCE with Moscow, Minsk and others in attempting to undermine the organization’s democracy promotion. Promises from Astana are not enough, we’ve been clear on the kinds of demonstrable progress that would be needed to secure U.S. endorsement, and the Kazakhs have not come through. Given the stakes for the OSCE as an organization, and our own credibility on human rights, allowing this to go through would be a disaster.

I am well aware of the tremendous pressure being brought to bear on Ambassador Strohal and ODIHR by those seeking to divert attention away from their violations of OSCE commitments under the pretext that the Helsinki process is somehow out of balance. The saying “if it isn’t broken, don’t fix it” aptly applies. If the countries concerned spent half as much time and effort bringing their policies into conformity with OSCE standards, we would all be better off. Tinkering with OSCE is potentially dangerous, a waste of time and effort and will never placate those determined to undermine the human dimension.

Turning to substance, there are two specific areas of ODIHR activity I want to mention.

First is the work on anti-trafficking. Since I introduced the first anti-trafficking Supplementary Item at the St. Petersburg Annual Session of the OSCE PA in 1999, and subsequent Trafficking in Persons legislation here in the Congress, efforts to control trafficking have

become part of almost every OSCE country's legislative agenda and the work of most multilateral organizations.

In December, 2003, the OSCE adopted the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings which calls upon participating States to take initiatives to prevent trafficking, prosecute traffickers, and protect victims with the assistance of OSCE institutions and field operations. The OSCE appointed a special representative on trafficking in 2004 with a similar mandate.

The ODIHR has designed and implemented projects with governments and NGOs that raise awareness about the risks of trafficking, assist in legislative review and reform, and promote the adoption of National Referral Mechanisms both in countries of origin and destination in order to protect and assist the victims of trafficking.

I applaud the ODIHR on its efforts and stand ready to do all I can to make sure those efforts succeed.

Another key area that concerns me is the current state of ODIHR's international election observation efforts. I'm particularly concerned about the ongoing Russian efforts at least to curtail the international election observation efforts of ODIHR if not to end them all together. The Kremlin is clearly miffed that elections under President Putin's have not been assessed as free and fair. Others have joined this attack on the office with heightened intensity in the aftermath of democratic revolts in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. It is worth noting that Russia has now adopted a regressive election law in advance of important parliamentary elections next year and presidential elections in 2008.

Let me be clear. We will not sit idly by and allow Russia, Belarus and others to undo the Helsinki Final Act, either piece by piece or in one fell swoop. Neither will we permit the dismemberment of ODIHR by them or others.

Mr. Chairman, it is appropriate that today's hearing comes as the Helsinki Commission marks 30 years of dedicated bipartisan service in upholding the core principles of the Helsinki Final Act and focusing on implementation by all of OSCE commitments. We appreciate the partnership this Commission has had with ODIHR over the years and promise our continued support as together we endeavor to defend the human rights and dignity of individuals throughout the OSCE region.

I look forward to hearing the testimonies of our witnesses.