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Testimony Before

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Chairman Cardin, Chairman Hastings, distinguished members of Congress and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, dear fellow panel members and attending guests, it is an honor for me to be here. As Kazakh Ambassador to the United States, I have much to report about our country and its bold journey towards democracy.

Like refitting a ship while it is under sail, the task of political, economic, and social reform can be daunting and at times even uncertain. But a significant progress is made. Opportunities are realized. And hope in the promise of even better things to come compels us forward. This is what I will speak of today, and how the history and strategic value of Kazakhstan qualify it uniquely to serve in the chairmanship of the OSCE. I will also share with you our vision and agenda attendant with that chairmanship.

As I speak, I want you to know of the gratitude we have to the leaders of this commission, for your counsel, and the guiding influence that is felt and appreciated in Astana. Few things can be as dangerous as building a bridge while you walk on it. But Kazakhstan's transformational leaders moving the ninth largest country in the world from communism to democracy are emboldened by cooperation with the Helsinki Commission.

While we are proud of our accomplishments early on, we recognize that this was only the beginning. It was the foundation for greater things to come – the foundation for advances in constitutional reform, the rule of law, free and fair elections, an empowered parliament, and civil liberties that emphasize human rights, including freedom of the press and the freedom to worship.

This progress has taken place not throughout centuries, but remarkably within 17 years. The example of America – the world's beacon of liberty – demonstrates that Democracy is a journey. For young Kazakhstan full Democracy is not the start, it is rather the destination through an exciting and challenging journey. We are proud that we have successfully embarked on that journey and we are motivated by the milestones that we have already achieved.

Among them is the reform of the judicial system and a multi-party parliament, with open and monitored elections. The presidential term has been reduced from seven years to five, and media reforms provide equal coverage to all candidates and parties. The rights of individuals are being upheld in jury trials, often against state and local authorities. And Kazakhstan is a leader in efforts against human trafficking.

The milestones, Mr. Chairman, are tangible. We are a multi-ethnic state. We affirm respect for all. There are more than 4,000 religious groups representing 46 denominations. There are 1,000 Protestant Christian organizations with 600 chapels, 281 Orthodox organizations with 257 churches, 82 Roman Catholic churches, 28 synagogues and 1408 registered mosques in Kazakhstan.

Since our independence, all religious groups have seen considerable growth in numbers and popularity. During a visit to Kazakhstan, late Pope John Paul II affirmed that the guarantee of “rights and freedoms, the spirit of openness and cooperation [are a] part of [Kazakhstan’s] tradition.”

The Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Mennonites, Mormons, Hare Krishna followers, as well as Baha'is, Christian Scientists, and the Unification Church are all active in Kazakhstan. As our Chief Rabbi Yeshaya Cohen has testified before the Conference on Human Rights and Religious Freedoms, “In Kazakhstan, every religion and faith enjoys complete freedom of expression and government support and can well serve as an authentic model to all countries with regard to preventing and eliminating anti-Semitism and terrorism.”

So firm is our commitment, that even earlier this year an attempted amendment to the law on religious freedom that would have possibly created restrictions was ruled unconstitutional. And similar milestones attest to the freedoms enjoyed by the media and the non-governmental organizations that often serve watch over our progress. From a handful of media outlets – most of them official government oracles – today Kazakhstan has more than 2,000 media resources, 85 percent of which are non-governmental. Periodicals, television, and radio provide news and entertainment in a dozen different languages. Kazakhstan welcomes almost 100 media agencies and corporations from all over the world. CNN, BBC, Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, the Associated Press, Interfax... they are all there, along with transparency in government programs and access to resources and information. At their side are some 5,000 NGOs, operating freely in political life, civic development, human rights, business, the environment, health care, and gender policy.

The years 2008 and 2009 have seen further important milestones in our reform process: our laws on elections, political parties, media and local governance have been seriously improved in close cooperation with the OSCE, Organization’s Office

for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media as well as Kazakhstan's and international NGOs. Given the limited time and space for this testimony, we prepared detailed written briefs on all these improvements which I sent earlier to the Helsinki Commission through you and which are available in this chamber for everyone to enjoy.

Are we where we want to be, Mr. Chairman? No. True democracy is a journey. Are we pleased with our progress? Yes. It has been rightfully and unanimously recognized by the 56 member nations of the OSCE in their selection of Kazakhstan to chair the organization in 2010. This is a role that not only honors Kazakhstan's progress, but it is one for which our nation is uniquely prepared.

We are prepared not only through the rigors and lessons that attend our democratic journey, but through integrated and organizational efforts to assume the chairmanship – efforts that have been, and remain, our highest priority. Toward this end, we have already commenced working with our Finnish and Greek partners to ensure a cohesive and constructive operation of the OSCE. In March, we participated in the first joint meeting of OSCE and EU Troikas, to discuss the Georgian and Balkan issues, as well as architecture for European Security. We have established a full and separate permanent mission to the OSCE and created a task force within our Foreign Ministry to coordinate work with OSCE countries. We are training personnel at OSCE offices and in the foreign ministries of nations that have formerly served as chair.

As chairman, Kazakhstan is dedicated to advancing the three dimensions of the OSCE, strengthening the Organization and making it even more effective – building on the work and successes of past chairmen. This will be important in October of this year, when the transfer of chairmanship from Greece to Kazakhstan begins. We will have trained hundreds of diplomats, liaison officers, officials, managers and clerical personnel to ensure a constructive and successful process.

This constructive and cooperative effort will ensure that progress will continue apace in the military-political dimension, where we will focus on meeting new challenges and counteracting new threats, such as terrorism, extremism, organized crime, and trafficking of humans and narcotics. We will work to leverage OSCE capabilities for post-conflict rehabilitation of Afghanistan, to promote stability in the region, and to explore OSCE capabilities and resources in an effort to strengthen non-proliferation of hazardous materials and weapons of mass destruction.

In the economic and environmental dimension, Kazakhstan as chair of the OSCE will focus on promoting continued development of Eurasia's transportation infrastructure. Likewise, we will explore the potential of the Organization to address and influence the resolution of regional environmental challenges. Those who know the consequences our nation is suffering with the disasters associated with the Aral Sea and the former Soviet nuclear testing site of Semipalatinsk know

how important environmental issues are to Kazakhstan, blessed as it is with beauty and natural resources.

In the human dimension, we intend to emphasize through OSCE leadership the work we have undertaken internally, and that is the promotion of tolerance, non-discrimination, inter-cultural dialogue, and other human rights. One of our initiatives in this undertaking is to coordinate a roundtable to address the issue of tolerance on the eve of the Third Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, which will be held in Astana on July 1st and 2nd, 2009. We also intend to host in 2010 a major OSCE Conference on anti-Semitism and on other forms of intolerance. As OSCE Chairman Kazakhstan commits itself to work with ODIHR and other OSCE partners as closely as possible to maintain and enhance its mandate and important role.

Mr. Chairman, the Republic of Kazakhstan is honored to have been selected by the members of the OSCE to serve as chairman of the Organization in 2010. It will be the 35th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the 20th anniversary of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, and the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II. We place the work and responsibility of the OSCE within the context of these historic occasions, acknowledging the responsibility that leadership of the Organization entails. We also see a pattern to these events and will aspire that the year 2010 is marked by a major meaningful summit of the leaders of OSCE member states to discuss the common challenges for the OSCE and identify the way forward for the Organization. We recognize the historic march of democracy, bringing with it freedom, economic opportunity, and the hope for peace and security to people and nations throughout the world. As chairman of the OSCE, the Republic of Kazakhstan will strive to continue that effort, making the OSCE even more influential and relevant for its member nations – building on the past while remembering in the process that democracy is an exciting journey.

Thank you.