



HELSINKI COMMISSION BRIEFING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Rabbi Andrew Baker

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Director of International Jewish Affairs - American Jewish Committee

This is a critical point in the efforts to press the OSCE to embark on efforts to seriously combat anti-Semitism in Europe.

Three years ago the OSCE had not yet undertaken any measures to address the problem of anti-Semitism. It had only just agreed to hold a conference on the subject. This itself was a milestone, and it happened largely because of US pressure to do so. And that initiative, as people here well-know, came about thanks to the strong advocacy of the Helsinki Commission and its Congressional Members.

Looking back now, we must recognize that there has been remarkable progress. The Vienna Conference in 2003, followed by the Berlin Conference in 2004, brought governments together and secured commitments both for their own independent actions and for the work of the OSCE collectively. It resulted in the “Berlin Declaration” which was a dramatic expression of these commitments.

We should rightly take some satisfaction in what has been achieved.

A special unit on tolerance and non-discrimination has been established at ODIHR. It has on its staff an expert on anti-Semitism, Dr. Kathrin Meyer, who is ably engaged in the work that ODIHR has been tasked to do, which includes collecting reports from all member states and developing educational programs to address the problem.

At that first conference in Vienna, NY Mayor Rudi Giuliani spoke of the American experience in collecting data on hate crimes and the importance of a proper response by law enforcement to such crimes. The ODIHR has engaged Paul Goldenberg and his police colleagues to develop a program to “train trainers” in how to respond to hate crimes, which has already been taken to the police agencies of four OSCE countries, with others on the way. At a time when transatlantic relations are frayed, this is one contribution from the American side of the Atlantic—drawing on the work and experience of our various police departments—which is not only needed but welcomed on the other side.

The OSCE has also appointed a special representative for combating anti-Semitism. Serving as the Personal Representative of the Chair-in-Office, Bundestag Member Gert Weisskirchen is holding his own meetings with government officials and NGOs, helping to prod governments to do more and gathering advice and information from community groups on the extent and nature of the problem.

Three years ago, when we pressed the Europeans to take more seriously the problem of anti-Semitism, we were often told that we were exaggerating, that anti-Semitism was not so prevalent. It soon emerged that many government agencies themselves had no system for collecting data and many did not even have a definition of anti-Semitism. An EUMC report on anti-Semitism, then covering 15 countries, revealed that over half of their national monitors had no definition, and of those that did, no two were the same. Sadly, the truth became clear. Without a clear definition, monitors (where they did exist) were not recording anti-Semitic incidents. Not recording meant not counting; not counting meant not a problem. This is now changing. A working definition has been adopted by the EUMC. The same definition is now being used inside ODIHR in its hate crime police training program.

I dare say that each of these tangible advances is the direct result of the active support that comes from the members of this Commission, a product of the strong advocacy from the US Congress, directed to the State Department’s representatives, directed in bilateral meetings with the leaders of the OSCE and the ODIHR, and articulated in the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly meetings.

But right now, at this very moment, we are in danger of losing these gains.

For the police training program to continue there needs to be more financial support. For the work of ODIHR's special expert on anti-Semitism, there needs to be a financial commitment that will make the position part of that office's core budget. In fact, there needs to be a clear message of support for maintaining and strengthening its office on tolerance and non-discrimination, and this requires designated financial contributions from OSCE members including the United States.

We need to maintain the pressure in the political arena. The "historical memory" of OSCE ambassadors and even of our own State Department officials is rather short. We need to continue the necessary pressure to see that implementation of the commitments made by governments takes place. We need to insure that the call for another high level conference of the OSCE to address the problems of anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance to take place in Romania in 2007 (as the US enunciated at the OSCE Ministerial Meeting in Ljubljana in December 2005) be formally adopted by the Permanent Council. We need to insure that the implementation meetings that were promised for this year also take place and provide the necessary focus on anti-Semitism.

In closing, the OSCE has become a very important arena to address the problem of anti-Semitism, which sadly has reemerged in this first decade of the Twenty-First century. Much as we might wish otherwise, it is not a brief recurrence. It is serious; it is systemic; it has assumed new forms and expressions; and it requires a continued and long-term strategy to successfully combat it. There are some within the OSCE who might prefer to view it as a topic that was given its due and suggest now it is time to move on to other matters. Instead, we must insist on the opposite. The goal now is to insure that the OSCE remain equipped and committed to dealing with the problem—this year, next year and in the years to come.