



# HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON  
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

## Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin

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Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Opening Statement of Senator Benjamin L. Cardin,

Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Hearing on

“The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights:

Accomplishments and Challenges”

May 21, 2013

I would like to welcome Ambassador Lenarcic back here to the Commission today and thank him for this opportunity to discuss the ongoing work of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Since the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, human rights have formed an inseparable and core part of the OSCE’s comprehensive concept of security. Agreement was reached back in 1990 to create specialized institutions to assist the participating States in implementing their human dimension commitments, and based on a U.S. proposal, the then Office of Free Elections was established in Warsaw. It later was expanded to encompass human rights under the title it is known by today, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). In enhancing the role of the ODIHR, the 1992 Helsinki Summit declared that “the participating States express their strong determination to ensure full respect for human rights

and fundamental freedoms, to abide by the rule of law, to promote the principles of democracy and, in this regard, to build, strengthen and protect democratic institutions, as well as to promote tolerance throughout society.”

I think the international community is well aware that the U.S. Helsinki Commission has made human rights, the human dimension, and the work of ODIHR our top priority. We are proud of the role that we have had in advancing many of the most important human rights issues: from trafficking, where we share best practices to stop this modern form of slavery; to the tolerance agenda, where we are very proud of the role that we have had in improving the capacity of the OSCE through the work of the OSCE Special Representatives and sharing best practices; to transparency initiatives that have put a spotlight on anti-corruption strategies to advance good governance. We have made progress, but nonetheless, we still face significant issues.

While some OSCE countries have successfully transitioned to democracy, others appear to be moving backwards. Several participating States have yet to hold free and fair elections. Freedom of the media is threatened in many OSCE States, where journalists are harassed, attacked, or even killed for their work, and the Internet and other digital media are restricted. Non-governmental organizations and human rights defenders face reprisals for their work. Extremism laws are used to go after opposition activists or non-traditional religious groups. Anti-Semitism, racism, and discrimination continue to result in hate crimes. Roma, Europe's largest ethnic minority, continue to face pernicious discrimination in education, employment, and housing. I support ODIHR's work to address these issues.

The OSCE itself also faces challenges. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Roma Action Plan and the OSCE's first Conference on Racism, Xenophobia, and Discrimination. 2014 will mark not only the tenth anniversary of the OSCE's Tolerance Unit, but also the adoption of the seminal Berlin Declaration on combating anti-Semitism – where I myself was proud to be part of the U.S. Delegation. However, even as we commemorate and approach these anniversaries, OSCE efforts to address these issues face political problems. For two years in a row, Russia has blocked all human dimension decisions by the OSCE Ministerial Council, including a proposal at the Dublin Ministerial last December which would have strengthened OSCE Tolerance efforts. Agreement to hold the High Level Tolerance Conference taking place today in Tirana, Albania came only at the last minute and significantly diminishing its impact.

I would like to take this opportunity to applaud ODIHR's 2011 roundtable, 2012 hate crimes training, and other outreach efforts to the 7-10 million people of African descent in Europe who have been especially targeted by hate groups, in addition to challenges experienced by the North American African descent population. African descent civil society is still in great need of additional capacity building and I hope that ODIHR can build on these efforts.

I also would like to see ODIHR strengthen its work on gender issues and assisting participating States with promoting equality of opportunity between women and men. In this regard, I would like to acknowledge the presence in our audience today of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office Personal Representative on Gender Issues, June Zeitlin, and thank her for her work in this regard.

Ambassador Lenarcic, I understand you are working with the Department of State to arrange a visit to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, in preparation for possible monitoring of any legal proceedings related to it. I myself have visited Guantanamo, and I support your doing so as well as ODIHR involvement in monitoring the situation there. I believe the United States policy concerning the remaining detainees should be transparent and in accordance with acceptable standards.

I look forward to your thoughts on how these and other human rights efforts can be advanced in the OSCE.