



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report on HDIM by ODIHR Director Gísladóttir

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a.i. Harry Kamian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
October 5, 2017

Mr. Chair, I would first like to acknowledge the heartfelt condolences expressed to my delegation by you and many others over the senseless tragedy earlier this week in Las Vegas. We join others in condemning this and other recent attacks, including in Turkey, Canada, and France. And I want to again express our deepest sympathies and condolences to the families and loved ones of those who lost their lives, and wish the injured a full and speedy recovery. Thank you very much.

Madam Director, the United States warmly welcomes you to the Permanent Council. Thank you for your report, and thank you for organizing Europe and Eurasia's leading human rights event. We also extend our deep gratitude to the Chair, and to the people and government of Poland.

Madam Director, we agree that the 2017 HDIM was a success. The strong turnout and high quality of a large number of the side events demonstrate that HDIM remains one of the most important features of the OSCE calendar.

HDIM is a unique forum where participating States and civil society share a valued place at the same table. The participation of independent civil society members is essential to the quality and integrity of the HDIM discussions. Independent voices often provide ground-truth and deepen our understanding of the situation in specific countries, and trends in the broader region. Independent voices help us, participating States, find practical solutions to real problems.

As we all reaffirmed at Astana, human dimension commitments "are matters of direct and legitimate concern to all participating States and do not belong exclusively to the internal affairs of the state concerned." When a fellow participating State, or an NGO, or a journalist criticizes the human rights record of a particular government, this does not constitute interference in internal affairs.

The United States believes that it is important to uphold the longstanding practice at HDIM of giving members of civil society an opportunity to present their views, and it is incumbent on us, as participating States, to respond substantively. Despite the time constraints, a range of opinions can and should be heard. And that doesn't necessarily mean that all opinions are equally persuasive.

The United States calls on all participating States to uphold our human rights obligations, democratic principles, and OSCE commitments. We need to ensure that human rights

defenders, NGO members, and advocates who enriched our HDIM discussions are able to return to their countries without reprisal – including reprisal against family members or other associates. We remain concerned, Madam Director, by reports that family members of some NGO representatives also were detained or harassed in advance of the HDIM in an apparent effort to prevent these individuals from participating.

Madam Director, we too regret that some states chose to leave this year's meeting early or not participate at all. We would have been interested to hear these governments' perspectives on the broad range of issues covered at HDIM.

The United States emphasizes the importance of organizing HDIM working sessions to maximize speaking time for governments and NGOs. In our view, when necessary, introducers should be used sparingly, and preferably should come from within the OSCE as specified in the HDIM modalities. We also believe there must be more time for rights of reply – hearing responses to issues raised is extremely important in our view.

The United States will continue to oppose shortening the HDIM and hollowing-out its agenda. In many sessions the Speaker's List was full, and there was not enough time for everyone who wanted to speak. We also will continue to oppose any changes that reduce NGO access and participation.

We should be cautious not to reinforce through procedure and protocol attempts by Russia to legitimize actions that clearly undermine our shared principles. For example, we note the bogus official of Crimea who registered for HDIM as an NGO representative.

We need to reiterate again our disappointment that HDIM-related decisions were adopted so late in the year. The United States commits to work with the incoming Italian chair to support early adoption of the decisions next year, in accordance with required timelines. Madam Director, in this era of tight fiscal restraint, I would also encourage you and your colleagues at ODIHR to look very carefully to try to identify a cost effective venue for next year, given what we consider to be the exorbitant cost of this year's venue.

In closing, we look forward to working with you, Director Gísladóttir, other delegations, the Austrian and Italian Chairmanships, the new Secretary General, and the new leadership of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and High Commissioner on National Minorities to strengthen these important institutions. The United States will continue to defend their independence, mandates, and budgets.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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