



United States Mission to the OSCE

Opening Plenary Statement

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Robert Bradtke, Head of U.S. Delegation
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, September 23, 2013

It is a pleasure for me to return to my colleagues in the OSCE in this new capacity, and to reaffirm the United States' deep dedication to upholding and advancing OSCE Human Dimension commitments and institutions. My experience as the OSCE Minsk Group's U.S. Co-Chair, as well as my career-long diplomatic engagement across the OSCE region, only reinforces for me the wisdom of OSCE's concept of comprehensive security: that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms *within* states is essential to lasting security and cooperation *among* states.

Since the signing of the Final Act nearly four decades ago, when President Ford famously underscored that history will judge us not on the promises we make but on the promises we keep, implementation review has been a core component of the Helsinki process. The annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting remains a unique and invaluable contribution to multilateral diplomacy, standing as a pioneering example for other regional organizations that are developing their human rights machinery.

The OSCE's focus on Human Dimension commitments, and its reaffirmation of the important role played by civil society and a free media in helping to ensure full respect for those commitments, are hallmarks of the Helsinki process. I am honored to share this platform with speakers from civil society organizations that monitor implementation and press OSCE governments to keep their promises. And I am acutely aware of the fact that in many participating States, even as we meet, courageous men and women are at personal risk for advocating for human rights and peaceful, democratic reform. They count on the OSCE, and this HDIM, to amplify their voices and extend them a lifeline. At a time when civil society and independent media are coming under increasing pressure in a number of OSCE participating States, the importance of the Human Dimension and the HDIM cannot be overstated.

All participating States, the United States included, must strive to fulfill their commitments to respect the dignity and human rights of their people. As President Obama said last month on the 50th anniversary of the civil rights March on Washington, "The arc of the moral universe may bend toward justice,

but it doesn't bend on its own. To secure the gains this country has made requires constant vigilance, not complacency. Whether by challenging those who erect new barriers to the vote or ensuring that the scales of justice work equally for all, and the criminal justice system is not simply a pipeline from underfunded schools to overcrowded jails, it requires vigilance." The President credited the citizens who took part in the historic March with bringing change that has made our country a better place for all. "Because they marched," he said, "America became more free and more fair, not just for African-Americans but for women and Latinos, Asians and Native Americans, for Catholics, Jews and Muslims, for gays, for Americans with disabilities." The ability of men and women in all participating States to know and act upon – indeed to *insist* upon – their rights free from fear of harassment, reprisal, intimidation, or discrimination is essential to democracy everywhere.

The main focus of our efforts here at HDIM must be on the most serious gaps between promises made and promises kept. That is why we should direct our greatest collective attention at this implementation meeting to countries and conditions where the exercise of the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, peaceful assembly, religion, and movement are most seriously restricted. We should direct our attention where human rights trends are negative and democratic development has suffered setbacks, where action or inaction by participating States is the source of, or a major contributor to, human rights problems, or where human rights activists and vulnerable minority populations are under threat.

At the outset, I wish to spotlight a number of key concerns:

Increasing Pressure on Civil Society

In many participating States, civil society activists and organizations are under severe and mounting pressure from governments that are applying laws and administrative practices that are not in keeping with their international obligations and OSCE commitments to respect the fundamental freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. To cite some prominent examples: In Russia, we see a series of laws targeting, and related intrusive raids on, NGOs critical of the government, the prosecution of opposition figures and demonstrators, and a new law criminalizing public expression and peaceful assembly by LGBT persons and their supporters. In Belarus, the practice of arbitrary refusals to register NGOs and political parties on various pretexts continues. In Azerbaijan, we are concerned that the parliament passed legislation further restricting NGO financing and significantly increasing fines on participants and organizers of unauthorized protests. In Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, pressure on civil society, particularly on organizations that speak

out against the government, is increasing, and in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, pressure of this sort effectively prohibits the exercise of the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly entirely.

Political Obstacles to Free and Fair Elections Processes

Among participating States, elections continue to be problematic. In Belarus, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, a competitive environment continues to be aggressively denied. And in Russia we are concerned by the prosecution and suspension of non-partisan election watchdog organization “Golos,” whose work has long helped to inform the Russian people about the integrity of their elections. Meanwhile, we continue to hear criticism from some participating States, Russia in particular, of OSCE elections observation efforts. The OSCE upholds high standards of integrity, independence, and professionalism in elections observation and its elections work must be strongly supported and defended.

Shrinking Space for Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom, Online and Offline

My government shares the concern of the Representative on Freedom of the Media that across the globe, and within the OSCE region, the space for freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas, opinion, and information continues to shrink. In some OSCE participating States we continue to see the imposition of harsh civil penalties for insult or expression of opinion. We also see prosecutions designed to inflict crippling financial burdens on news organizations and government dominance in the ownership of media outlets. There is increasing misuse or abuse of anti-terrorism, anti-extremism, or incitement laws to intimidate, harass, and prosecute civil society members and journalists for what they say, print, broadcast, blog, text, or Tweet. Members of the media continue to be targeted for physical assault – even murder – often with impunity. The Freedom House global survey Freedom of the Press 2013 lists three OSCE participating States – Belarus, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – among the worst media freedom abusers in the world.

Intolerance and Hate Crimes

Vulnerable and marginalized populations within our OSCE community continue to be targets of intolerance, discrimination, and attacks that violate – often brutally – the inherent dignity of the human person. Participating States must unequivocally condemn discrimination, violence, and other ugly manifestations of hatred wherever they occur against Roma, Jews, Christians, Muslims, LGBT persons, and others. We are deeply concerned by the trends of

rising anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim discrimination in the OSCE region. And no participating State should deny the universal human rights of individuals because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Nor should any participating State take actions that contribute to an environment where violence against LGBT persons is tolerated. We must empower and take full advantage of OSCE institutions, including ODIHR and the offices of the High Commissioner on National Minorities and of the Three Tolerance Representatives, in working against hate crimes. And we must keep the spotlight trained on trafficking for the purposes of sexual or labor exploitation, violence against women and children, and discrimination against persons with disabilities.

Strengthening the Human Dimension

There is no better way for participating States to prepare for the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act than to marshal their political will to implement their Human Dimension commitments. To that end, they should fully avail themselves of the help of OSCE institutions and the valuable contributions of civil society.

Participating States must permit election observation missions and field activities to operate unhindered. Participating States that have thus far blocked the return of field missions to Belarus and Georgia should reconsider. New or enhanced missions should be deployed to meet unfolding challenges. OSCE mechanisms must be respected and permitted to function. Particularly in light of the increasing pressure against civil society and serious other implementation concerns in the OSCE region, any efforts to amend the Human Dimension calendar, agenda, or modalities, including those for the HDIM, should result in strengthening our Human Dimension efforts, not weakening them. To that end, the United States does not support any shortening of the HDIM and we will not agree to any lessening of the access and participation of NGOs.

States chairing this Organization have a particular responsibility to lead by example. We continue to be concerned about democratic backsliding and the politically motivated imprisonment of Yulia Tymoshenko and others in Ukraine. We encourage Serbia to continue the progress it is making internally and increasingly with its neighbors, which will hopefully allow its cooperation with Switzerland next year and its chairmanship in 2015 to be a success for us all. The United States continues to regret the denial of a seat at the table for Kosovo, which has a right and a need to be seated as a fellow participating State. I hope that the progress in the relations between Serbia and Kosovo that we have seen this year will allow Kosovo to participate soon.

My delegation intends to use this meeting to its fullest. Over the next two weeks, we will touch on issues that some will find sensitive and controversial, including human rights challenges regarding the treatment of minorities and migrant communities. We will hear sharp criticism of our own countries, and undoubtedly at times we will disagree. But as we engage with one another, I hope we will go beyond criticism and rebuttal. I hope we will:

Recommit our countries to fulfilling the commitments in the Human Dimension;

Give careful consideration to the shortcomings of our own countries, and approach the shortcomings of other countries, with a view to asking ourselves how we can do more and how we can take advantage of the assistance of the OSCE Human Dimensions institutions;

Listen to the voices of the members of non-governmental organizations and civil society who are here and have so much insight into the problems we are discussing.

The U.S. delegation will advocate forcefully for meeting Human Dimension Commitments – commitments that our leaders have undertaken, from Helsinki to Astana. We will work with you constructively to ensure respect for human rights throughout the OSCE region.

In closing, let me return to President Obama's address to the American people at the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington: "(W)e'll suffer the occasional setback," he said, "But we will win these fights. This country has changed too much." The President went on to urge today's generation of Americans "to keep on marching" to ensure that promises made at the founding of our nation are kept for *all* of our people. So, too, the people of the OSCE will see setbacks. But I have no doubt that Helsinki's promise will be kept, because, thanks in greatest measure to the courageous souls pressing for human rights and dignity and tolerance and democracy, the OSCE region, and the world, have changed too much for the outcome to be otherwise.