



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the report by Director of the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Michael Link

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 14, 2016

Before beginning I just wanted to say that I will abridge our statement because the United States finds much to agree with in what has been said by so many colleagues already. We agree with Canada and the EU on the high quality of and on the importance of the issues covered in ODIHR's and the HCNM's reporting on Crimea; we also agree on the importance of engagement with ODIHR without preconditions. Canada and Switzerland have both highlighted the importance of human rights defenders. Turkey's focus on tolerance and non-discrimination, and the focus by so many colleagues on the issue of hate crimes and particularly violent hate crimes – all of this we too find important and valuable in the work of ODIHR.

I have to say, the statement by our distinguished Russian colleague was very disappointing. It was the statement one expects of an autocratic regime, not of a government that purports to be a democracy. Given the Russian Federation's interest in seeing the work of ODIHR – as the Russian Federation stated – continue to grow in quality, that the Russian Federation will surely support enhancing the resources provided to ODIHR so that it can do its important work.

I also take note of the Russian Federation's statement that anniversaries are an opportunity to be self-critical and to assess what we still have to do in the work ahead of us, and I think that is an accurate statement, and one that will be useful to recall in the future.

Director Link, the United States welcomes you back to the Permanent Council. Your presence is especially important as we celebrate the 25th anniversary of ODIHR. The breadth of issues ODIHR addresses day-in and day-out is impressive and inspiring. Likewise, the depth at which ODIHR is able to engage on those issues with such a small staff and a modest budget is also impressive. From training lawyers on litigation related to freedom of religion or belief, to training police on combating hate crimes, to advocating for inclusive voter registration, ODIHR is leading the way on numerous areas of critical importance to the security of our region, and you and your team deserve our gratitude.

ODIHR's institutional independence and comprehensive assessment methodology constitute the gold standard for objective and impartial election observation, not only in this region, but in the

world. As I noted in the Permanent Council on March 3, the United States has welcomed OSCE observation of our general elections on November 8. Planning for an ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission to Washington is well underway, and we look forward to reporting in the months ahead on next steps before November 8. Given other important elections planned for 2016 in the OSCE region, including those in Serbia, Macedonia, Moldova, Mongolia, Georgia, and the Russian Federation, we call on those participating States who have not yet invited OSCE observers to do so without delay in keeping with our shared commitments.

We also heard your call today, Director Link, for ODIHR to be properly resourced, to be able to offer its gold standard observation and recommendation to all participating States, and indeed to fund its vital broader work.

On the subject of Ukraine, we look forward to comprehensive monitoring by ODIHR of local elections to be held in accordance with Ukrainian law and OSCE commitments in certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, as agreed in the Minsk Package of Measures of February 12, 2015. ODIHR should be ready to deploy an election observation mission after agreement is reached within the Trilateral Contact Group on local election modalities and the Ukrainian Rada passes the law necessary to set the election date or dates.

Director Link, I know that you have repeatedly offered ODIHR's technical expertise to support constructive work in the Trilateral Contact Group and its working groups. We also encourage ODIHR to be prepared to advise the Trilateral Contact Group on election security standards and prerequisites once Russia and the separatists are ready to engage meaningfully on local election modalities and the role of an independent election security presence. A real and lasting ceasefire, of course, is a prerequisite for elections and for the presence of an international election monitoring mission. Recognizing that the freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly need to be safeguarded to enable free and fair elections to proceed, we also encourage ODIHR to advise the SMM on observing human rights issues in the conflict area.

The Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is another example of how ODIHR creates an invaluable platform for the participating States and civil society representatives to engage in a comprehensive review of the implementation of OSCE human dimension commitments, spotlighting concerns and identifying ways to effectively address them. We encourage participating States to bring high-level officials and prominent experts and practitioners to Warsaw, and to take full advantage of the opportunity to engage civil society organizations from across the region. We likewise look forward to participating in the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting that will begin later today, and are pleased to have experts from the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Helsinki Commission joining us.

Human rights defenders sometimes joke that their ultimate goal is to work themselves out of a job. In other words, if they are successful, the world would be a place where human rights are universally respected and human rights defenders are no longer needed. Unfortunately, it appears human rights defenders have plenty of job security. With the erosion of democratic institutions and the rule of law in some participating States, an empowered and resourced ODIHR is just as, if not more, necessary today as at any time in the history of our organization.

In closing, let me once again thank ODIHR for its efforts to maintain and uphold our collective OSCE human dimension commitments that are fundamental for our durable security. The United States continues to support you strongly in your essential work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and please pass our thanks to your team, Director Link, as well.