



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the Head of ODIHR, Christian Strohal

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 7, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you Ambassador Strohal for your comprehensive report on ODIHR activities in 2007 and plans for 2008. You should by now understand fully that the United States continues to commend you for your continued dedication and exceptional leadership.

The election observation schedule for 2008 is ambitious, as usual. We know that ODIHR is up to the task and you can count on our continued support.

We congratulate you for ongoing improvements in ODIHR's election observation methodology, which remains the gold standard for election monitoring around the world. ODIHR's well-known, objective standards and election observer procedures should be supported, and in this regard we will continue to oppose any effort to undermine ODIHR's autonomy in this area or to turn back the clock on the progress we have made in democratic practices within the OSCE region.

It is unfortunate that ODIHR was not allowed proper access to allow it to conduct a professional election observation of the recent parliamentary elections in the Russia Federation. We had hoped that the restrictions imposed by the Russian Federation would not be so onerous as to prevent the OSCE from observing the March 2 Presidential election, even in a limited capacity. Thus, the United States has no problem in expressing its deep regrets that ODIHR will be unable to carry out its responsibilities as agreed to by participating member States.

Discussions at the HDIM brought out several areas on which we believe the OSCE should focus Human Dimension events in 2008. In particular, we believe it would be timely to focus on impediments to the full enjoyment of religious freedoms, possibly through a Human Dimension event separate from the tolerance rubric. The continued difficulties faced by human rights defenders in exercising and protecting the freedoms of association, expression and assembly merit continued attention and focus. Related to this is the increasing regulatory burden being placed on NGOs in an apparent attempt to prevent them from carrying out their essential role in protecting democratic freedoms.

Combating intolerance and discrimination remains a very important issue. However, we must ensure that the ODIHR's work in this evolving topic remains focused on themes where we have reached consensus - combating anti-Semitism, intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians and members of other religions, and racism, xenophobia and related intolerance. OSCE participating States have consciously and correctly limited the scope of OSCE interest in the area of tolerance and non-discrimination to those that could threaten the security of the region. Expansion of OSCE commitments beyond these priority areas dilutes OSCE tolerance programs and projects and duplicates activities of other organizations. We welcomed the issuance of the Hate Crimes report for 2007 and encourage your continued work on refining definitions and standardizing data collection in the OSCE region.

We look forward to working with you Ambassador Strohal, and the participating States, to strengthen the implementation of our OSCE Human Dimension commitments. We applaud ODIHR for its excellent work and you have our full support in the coming year as we work to address the issues raised in your report.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.