



United States Mission to the OSCE

Closing Plenary: Final Remarks

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador David Johnson
OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, October 7, 2011

Moderator,

As we mark the close of this two-week session, we should reflect for a moment on what makes this annual encounter so special, and indeed so essential. There is inherent value in a focused discussion among participating States on the implementation of our shared Human Dimension commitments. But, more importantly, the HDIM exemplifies the critical role that the OSCE has always played in engaging and inspiring civil society, and the necessity—not the nicety—of these links.

As Secretary Clinton stated in Astana last year: “Strong democracies, thriving economies, and stable societies cannot be built by governments alone. There must be a partnership between governments, vibrant institutions and free societies that work together to solve the problems that we face in the 21st century.”

During this meeting, we have heard from members of civil society from across the OSCE space. In plenary sessions and in a wide range of side events they have shared compelling and eloquent testimony. We learned from a Belarusian journalist about the perils of speaking out in a country ruled by a repressive regime. We heard stark accounts from European Roma of growing anti-Roma sentiments and violence. A human rights defender told us about her visit to Kyrgyz activist Azimjan Askarov, serving a life sentence based on a confession coerced by torture. These sorts of exchanges, and the efforts that ensue as a result, are precisely what are needed if we are to grasp and solve 21st century challenges.

As has been the case in previous years, the level of participation in most sessions was so high that the time allotted for interventions and replies had to be curtailed multiple times. Attendance at the diverse array of nearly fifty side events was broad and engaged. These indicators suggest that we should maintain, or even expand, this event, and we should seek ways to increase attendance by non-governmental organizations. The United States believes the participation of NGOs is integral to this process and therefore has a longstanding practice of inviting U.S. NGOs to join our daily delegation meetings. Over the past two weeks, some of these NGOs highlighted areas of concern regarding United States implementation of our human dimension commitments. We welcomed these interventions and the opportunity to engage constructively with civil society, even when we might disagree.

The discussions over the past two weeks have helped shine a spotlight on issues of concern in the OSCE Human Dimension, and, in some cases, have highlighted differing

perceptions among participating States regarding the proper role of the OSCE and how our shared commitments are best met.

The ongoing political repression in Belarus, which led to the invocation of the Moscow Mechanism in April, is one such example. This year's HDIM served as a rallying point for Belarusian activists and a vibrant coalition of international NGOs committed to the support of democratic ideals and practices in Belarus. Yesterday, I had the privilege of visiting the newly-opened "Belarus House" here in Warsaw. It is run by a courageous group of young Belarusian activists who assist Belarusian refugees; unite, through culture and dialogue, the Belarusian diaspora; and support activists and political prisoners in Belarus. These young men and women made abundantly clear to us that united, firm support from the United States and Europe is essential and profoundly appreciated.

We've concentrated a great deal of our attention on Belarus at this year's HDIM because the regime's practices flout OSCE principles and commitments. Civil society, a bellwether of democracy in contemporary states, has drawn ample attention to the plight of Belarusian democratic leaders, human rights activists, and indeed regular citizens there. The Freedom House report on Belarus, issued at a side event this week, highlights the Lukashenka government's clear intent to minimize political rights and civil liberties in Belarus.

There was a lively exchange between members of the United States and Russian Federation delegations about election observation. This is a timely subject, as ODIHR is engaged in preparations to observe historic elections in Kyrgyzstan in a few weeks time. As the U.S. delegation noted in its right of reply to the question "why do we need election observers?" the answers lie in the Copenhagen Document and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. They both say that the authority of government derives from the will of the people expressed in democratic elections. So, citizens, in effect, own elections, because that is where sovereignty truly resides. Observers confirm whether or not their elections are free and fair and help identify areas to improve in future elections. That is what the ODIHR does, based on impartial criteria applied consistently throughout all states.

The United States was gratified to hear from Russian Central Election Commission Chairman Churov of his intent to issue an unrestricted invitation to ODIHR to observe the December 4 Duma elections. Looking forward, the United States will issue an unrestricted invitation for our 2012 Congressional and Presidential elections, and will work, through appropriate bodies, to facilitate effective election observation by the OSCE and other appropriate organizations, free from barriers.

Discussions at the HDIM are also informed by events transpiring in our midst. The past two weeks have seen violent anti-Roma protests and rhetoric in Bulgaria and violence against the international presence in Kosovo.

The recent events in Bulgaria echo similar unrest and targeting of Roma that have occurred in the Czech Republic and in Hungary, and remind us of the debates surrounding evictions and expulsions of Roma from throughout Europe. The HDIM's focus on Roma and

Sinti issues was thus extraordinarily timely. In numerous sessions, experts, NGOs and individual Roma discussed growing intolerance toward Roma and highlighted the potential for ethnic tensions to devolve into ethnic violence.

The bigotry exhibited against Roma can also be linked to a disturbing trend of growing radical racist ideologies across several countries in the OSCE space. In some countries, those receptive to extremist political ideologies may make up more than 20 percent of the populace; this is an alarming development. Responsible political leaders should publicly condemn intolerance and prejudice. They should avoid inflammatory language that once was the province of fringe parties. Unfortunately, this rhetoric is increasingly echoed by mainstream politicians, such as the admonition by one Western European leader that if a certain Mayoral candidate were elected in his country, a large city would turn into a “Gypsytown.”

Recent violence in Kosovo was a subject of several exchanges during the context of discussions on freedom of movement. On September 27, a group of up to 500 Serbs—with a heavy truck, firearms, pipe bombs, grenades, and rocks—attacked KFOR troops in northern Kosovo. They wounded nine KFOR soldiers, eight of whom were American. This attack heightened tensions and risked the lives of U.S. and Allied forces, as well as local civilians. In these halls, this attack gave rise to heated exchanges and unfounded accusations from Serbian and Russian representatives against KFOR, which is comprised of troops from 39 participating States. The fact that our Serbian and Russian colleagues, instead of condemning the violent attack, would call into question the legitimate authority of KFOR to carry out its mandate and to act in self-defense is troubling on many levels. This incident was an assault on an international institution, whose presence in Kosovo, like that of EULEX and the OSCE Mission, is to provide support and security for ALL of Kosovo’s citizens.

While all states have the obligation to protect their citizens from violent extremism and other threats, our delegation has noted that several OSCE states interpret that obligation in ways that restrict the rights of their populations. In the past year, Tajikistan has adopted a new “Law on Parental Responsibility” which restricts participation in religious activities by children under the age of 18. This is in addition to restrictive registration requirements for religious groups already in place. Other OSCE states, such as Russia, define extremism so broadly that its laws are used to ban peaceful religious groups and literature. We are also concerned by the growing number of participating States that have adopted or are considering bans on religious expression, including attire.

The HDIM, like the OSCE writ large, has always been a venue for frank debate and for the open airing of concerns among the governments and citizens of participating States. That is its strength and its enduring value. We look forward to discussions of ways in which we might further enhance the effectiveness of this forum, including by exploring new avenues for expanding the opportunities for access by members of civil society, many of whom may not be able to afford to make the trip to Warsaw. We would be particularly interested in exploring ways to use new technologies such as streaming video or social media, to broaden access to our discussions.

Looking ahead to Vilnius and beyond, we believe that it is essential that OSCE participating States confirm in a Ministerial-level decision the application of longstanding commitments on fundamental freedoms to new media. As Secretary Clinton has emphasized: “The rights of individuals to express their views freely, petition their leaders, worship according to their beliefs—these rights are universal, whether they are exercised in a public square or on an individual blog. The freedoms to assemble and associate also apply in cyberspace. In our time, people are as likely to come together to pursue common interests online as in a church or a labor hall.”

It is no coincidence that authorities, who try to restrict the exercise of fundamental freedoms by their people, impede the work of human rights defenders and civil society organizations, control the press and obstruct the flow of information, tend to be the same authorities who try to restrict, impede, control and obstruct their citizens’ peaceful use of new digital technologies. In her remarks to this gathering, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, voiced concern about Internet regulation policies proposed by several participating States.

Equally important, we believe is a renewed commitment at the Ministerial level to the protection of journalists. On October 5, the Representative on Freedom of the Media issued a new report detailing the threats and responses to attacks against journalists in the OSCE region. “The right of journalists to carry out their work in safety, without fear of being harassed, attacked, beaten or killed is fundamental to the protection of all other human rights. As long as journalists are afraid for their lives and the lives of their families while doing their job, we do not live in a free society.” One of the shocking statistics in this report is the fact that in the last five years only three out of almost thirty cases of murdered journalists in the OSCE region have been successfully prosecuted.

We must do better.

We also must continue to make progress in the fight against human trafficking, and look forward to working with other participating States toward a Ministerial Declaration in Vilnius that will help us build on the good work of the OSCE and participating States in fighting this scourge.

Finally, I would like to recall an extraordinary scene from the opening plenary. The keynote speaker, Khadija Cherif, the International Federation for Human Rights Secretary General, spoke about the revolution in her native Tunisia, and then offered heartfelt expressions of support for political prisoners in Belarus. It is time that we consider additional ways in which the OSCE can support not only the aspirations of democrats in the heart of Europe, but also those of our Mediterranean Partners. A Ministerial Declaration along these lines would send an important signal and is a good first step.