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Remarks at the OSCE First Plenary Session

Remarks

Hillary Rodham Clinton

Secretary of State

LitExpo Conference Center

Vilnius, Lithuania

December 6, 2011



Thank you and the president of the Republic of Lithuania and the government and people of your country for hosting this year's for hosting this year's OSCE Ministerial and for your steadfast global leadership in support and defense of human dignity and democracy.

I appreciated your reference to the continuing importance of human rights – not simply as a moral imperative, but as an essential component of international security and stability. That is especially important and timely in a year in

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which ordinary citizens – across the Middle East and beyond – have shown that dignity, freedom, and opportunity are aspirations for all people.

Their power to change the course of history demonstrates, once again, the rightness of the comprehensive security concept that is at the heart of the OSCE: lasting peace and stability depend just as much on meeting our citizens' legitimate aspirations as they do on military security.

As we reaffirmed last year at the Astana Summit, our commitment to this human dimension of security is—and should be—at the core of everything we do together. And when we put commitment into practice, more people will live in dignity, prosperity, and security, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, Minsk to Tashkent, Cairo to Kabul.

Today, across our region, we are witnessing a wide range of serious human rights concerns that go to the heart of our OSCE commitments. There are growing restrictions on the exercise of fundamental rights through the OSCE region.

In Belarus, less than 40 kilometers away from here, human rights defenders face unremitting persecution: people like Ales Bialiatski – sentenced to four and a half years in prison for tax evasion, but whose real crime, in the eyes of the state, was helping victims of state repression; former presidential candidates from the democratic opposition, Andrei Sannikau and Mikalai Statkevich, still in prison a year after the government crackdown, along with other political prisoners.

The OSCE region has seen independent journalists attacked and even killed with impunity. And we applaud Lithuania's leadership on the safety of journalists and media pluralism.

We also see growing intolerance, xenophobia, and hate crimes against religious and ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups, such as LGBT individuals. Violence against women knows no geographic boundaries, and human trafficking remains an urgent problem in the OSCE region.

We see setbacks for democratic institutions, the rule of law, and electoral processes. We witness prosecutions, such as that of Yulia Tymoshenko in Ukraine, which raises serious questions about political motivations. And when authorities fail to prosecute those who attack people for exercising their rights or exposing abuses, they subvert justice and undermine the people's confidence in their governments.

And as we have seen in many places, and most recently in the Duma elections in Russia, elections that are neither free nor fair have the same effect. We have serious concerns about the conduct of those elections. Independent political parties, such as PARNAS, were denied the right to register. And the preliminary report by the OSCE cites election day attempts to stuff ballot boxes, manipulate voter lists, and other troubling practices.

We're also concerned by reports that independent Russian election observers, including the nationwide Golos network, were harassed and had cyber attacks on their websites, which is completely contrary to what should be the protected rights of people to observe elections, participate in them, and disseminate information.

We commend those Russian citizens who participated constructively in the electoral process. And Russian voters deserve a full investigation of electoral fraud and manipulation. And we recognize the Russian Government's willingness to allow the OSCE to observe these elections, we now hope and urge them to take action on the recommendations that will be forthcoming from the OSCE electoral observer mission.

The Russian people, like people everywhere, deserve the right to have their voices heard and their votes counted. And that means they deserve fair, free, transparent elections and leaders who are accountable to them.

As we work to address human rights and other challenges, we also must recognize that rights exercised in cyber space deserve as much protection as those exercised in real space. Fundamental freedoms of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and religion apply as much to a Twitter conversation and a gathering organized by NGOs on Facebook as they do to a demonstration in a public square. And today's activists hold the Helsinki Accords in one hand and a smart phone in the other.

That is why we and 27 co-sponsors of the draft Declaration on Fundamental Freedoms in the Digital Age believe it is important for the OSCE to reaffirm that our earliest commitments made in the Helsinki process apply on the internet. Or as we might put it in 21st century language: enduring freedoms, new apps.

We urge all participating States to join us and our co-sponsors in adopting the declaration. In keeping with OSCE's comprehensive concept, we seek a substantive ministerial outcome, not just in the human, economic and military security dimensions but on issues that cut across all three, and in the outreach to states in the Middle East and North Africa as they undergo democratic transitions.

Now, in Egypt, new actors will be seated in the parliament, including representatives of Islamist parties. Transitions require fair and inclusive elections, but they also demand that those who are elected embrace democratic norms and rules. We therefore expect all democratic actors and elected officials to uphold universal human rights, including women's rights, to allow free religious practice, to promote tolerance and good relations among communities of different faiths, and to support peaceful relations with their neighbors. Democracies are guided by the rules of the game, including the inevitable transfers of power from one party to another. And the Egyptian people deserve a democracy that is enduring.

We urge the Egyptian authorities to ensure that free and fair voting continues through the next election rounds and to adhere to their commitments to move toward a new civilian government. Over the next few months, the Egyptian Government must protect peaceful protestors and hold accountable those responsible for previous incidents of violence.

Many participating OSCE states, which have made the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, have expertise that is uniquely relevant for the work ahead in our Mediterranean partner states. And we hope this ministerial will open new channels of engagement between the OSCE and those partners – in both directions.

Yesterday in Bonn, we welcomed the commitments that Afghanistan's regional partners had made at the Istanbul conference. And I encourage the OSCE to find more ways to support the Istanbul process and the Bonn outcomes as Afghanistan pursues peace and reconciliation, transitions to responsibility for its security, and prepares for elections in 2013 and 2014.

Even as the United States seeks cooperation with governments in the Central Asian region on Afghanistan, trade, energy and other matters, we will continue to encourage our Central Asian partners, both governments and civil society, to pursue democratic reforms and better respect for fundamental human rights.

With regard to the security dimension, we support France's efforts to promote transparency measures regarding military activities across the OSCE region, and we believe this should be Topic A at next year's Forum for Security Cooperation.

And with regard to Russia and the CFE Treaty, we are ready to find a way forward on conventional arms control that is consistent with core principles important to all OSCE members. While not all OSCE members are CFE signatories, all are affected by its fate.

We remain committed to efforts to strengthen OSCE capabilities in the conflict cycle, so we can respond quickly and decisively to emerging crises.

Concerning the protracted conflict in Georgia, we applaud the good work taking place in Geneva and via the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism toward a peaceful settlement. We remain committed to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. And we encourage progress in Geneva to resolve the conflict through direct dialogue between Georgia and Russia, greater transparency regarding Russian militarization of the separatist regions, and establishing an international monitoring presence.

On the conflict in Moldova, we welcome the resumption of formal 5+2 talks. We believe the 5+2 should meet early next year, in order to make progress toward a comprehensive settlement.

And we and our Minsk Group co-chair colleagues and the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan have reconfirmed our shared commitment to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As Presidents Obama, Medvedev and Sarkozy said in Deauville, only a negotiated settlement can lead to peace, stability, and reconciliation.

So, Mr. Chairman, we must never lose sight of the truth at the core of our comprehensive security concept: Respect for human rights and human security is essential to the progress and security of all countries, here in the OSCE region and across the globe. That is why, after I leave the plenary hall today, I will meet with civil society representatives from Belarus and with civil society leaders from across the region who took part in the Parallel Conference. And they have called attention to these human rights challenges and are discussing ways they can be addressed. I look forward to reviewing their recommendations. And I welcome the announcement that 35 leading civil society groups from more than 20 countries throughout the OSCE are creating a Civic Solidarity Platform that will combine in-person human rights advocacy with a cutting-edge online presence.

Mr. Chairman, while governments alone bear the responsibility of meeting their commitments, governments alone cannot tackle the complex challenges we face in the 21st century. That requires engaged citizens, freely exercising their God-given rights and empowered by the latest technologies. They can and must be our partners in finding solutions to the great issues of our time.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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