



United States Mission to the OSCE

Warsaw Human Dimension Conference

Opening Session

**Dafna Rand, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State
for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor**

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Thank you to the many honorable leaders and members of civil society who stand together today. The United States Delegation is grateful to the Maltese Chair for his principled leadership, the Maltese Government for hosting this conference, and the Maltese President for her participation. We are pleased to join the overwhelming number of participating States and hundreds of civil society representatives from across the OSCE region for these important discussions. I'm Dafna Rand, the new U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor.

This is my first Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, but not my first trip to Poland. Whenever I travel here, I feel the presence of Poland's proud and often painful history. The people of Poland know that the price of freedom is dear. They know what it's like to live under tyranny – in the last century alone, they endured the Nazi occupation and Soviet totalitarianism. And they prevailed. No wonder that Poland, and the vast majority of OSCE participating States, have been such staunch supporters of the people of Ukraine as they defend their country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence against Russia's brutal aggression.

We are once again at a moment of history that is an inflection point in terms of global governance. Foundational UN and OSCE principles that uphold the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, and the rights and dignity of all individuals, are under siege -- not least by the Kremlin, and its enabler, the Lukashenka regime in Belarus. A "might makes right" world is not a place where anybody can be safe or free for long. Never has the nexus of our interests and our values been clearer. When democratic Ukraine valiantly defends its freedom and independence against the Kremlin's aggression, it also fights on behalf of these foundational principles. We stand up for these same principles when we stand united with Ukraine.

History teaches us that the greatest threats to security come from countries whose leaders wield power with impunity and violate the rights of their own citizens. Repression at home and aggression abroad make for a dangerous combination—this is a double-headed threat to security.

Putin and his accomplices will not escape responsibility – not here at the WHDC – not anywhere – for the crimes committed against the people of Ukraine. Through the UN Commission of Inquiry, invocations of OSCE mechanisms, and the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, we and our partners are documenting the war crimes, crimes against humanity and other atrocities committed by members of Russia's

forces and other Russian officials. There will be accountability, whether in Ukraine's, in foreign, or in international courts.

Nor will the Kremlin and the Lukashenka regime avoid accountability for their massive and intensifying domestic crackdowns. These threats at home and abroad are mutually reinforcing. By absenting themselves yet again from this conference, Russia and Belarus only isolate themselves and show that even **they** know their actions are indefensible. The Kremlin's attempts to weaken the OSCE and obstruct its Human Dimension activities will fail. This conference testifies to the determination of participating States and successive Chairs to carry on OSCE's impactful work.

Here at this conference and throughout the year, the OSCE will keep the spotlight on the Kremlin's and the Lukashenka regime's abhorrent actions. We also will defend and advance the cause of human rights and democracy in other countries throughout this vast region.

Let me be very clear about what the United States stands for. We will partner with participating States and OSCE institutions to promote free and fair elections and support OSCE observation missions, including to the upcoming elections in my country. We will expose malign state and state-supported actors that interfere in elections, spread disinformation in the OSCE region to exacerbate societal divisions and sow distrust in democracy. My country will always uphold press freedom, including for media organizations with which we vehemently disagree. And at the same time we will expose covert influence operations that use media outlets as a cover. We will counter lies with facts, not censorship. This is a critical moment for defending and strengthening the pillars of democracy – press freedom, civil and political rights, free and fair elections, transparent governance. We will call out democratic backsliding and work with concerned governments and civil society to reverse it. We also urge fellow participating States to engage with civil society in implementing announced political reforms.

We oppose laws enacted or being considered in a growing number of countries that can be used to punish critical voices, prevent peaceful assembly and association, silence independent media, or persecute people for their race, their ethnicity, their religion, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, or sex characteristics. Dissent is not a crime. Journalism is not a crime. Members of marginalized racial and ethnic communities should not be scapegoats for societal woes. Practicing one's faith is not extremism. Whether identifying as LGBTQI+ or not, exercising one's human rights threatens no one.

Rule by force is not rule of law. We will relentlessly press for the release of political prisoners and an end to torture. The number of individuals jailed for exercising human rights and fundamental freedoms continues to rise. Not coincidentally, countries that hold political prisoners tend to be the same ones where torture is systemic. We will counter transnational repression. Civil society activists in this room are acutely aware that some governments in this region reach across their borders to intimidate and punish critics living abroad. Participating States must do our utmost to thwart attempts at transnational repression and hold perpetrators accountable. We all have an obligation to not return people to places where they would be persecuted or tortured.

The United States rejects racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and intolerance in all their forms. All reports of hate crimes must be investigated – whether against Jews, Muslims, or others – and, when evidence warrants, prosecuted. Our OSCE commitment to respect the

human rights and inherent dignity of all persons means **all**, not just those who are like us or whom the government favors. We strongly support OSCE's Tolerance and Non-Discrimination work promoting equality and inclusion.

In conclusion, I come from a country with a 248-year-old democracy. Every year since we have struggled to protect our democracy and promote human rights in it. We have at times failed, at times improved our institutions, and at times confronted new threats to our democracy. We are in a season of continuous need to promote tolerance and civil rights in my country. No country here has a perfect record. Every country can and must do better, my own included. The OSCE's experts, institutions, and field missions are helpful resources. We should use them. The United States is proud to contribute funding for many OSCE projects, including in the Western Balkans, Central Asia, Moldova, and Ukraine, working with governments and local civil society to advance reforms, promote media freedom, foster women's leadership, combat gender-based violence, and stop trafficking in persons.

When participating States make good faith efforts to implement Human Dimension commitments, we create favorable conditions for governments and civil society to work together on problems having profound human consequences: from reversing democratic setbacks and fighting corruption to taking action against climate change and preventing or resolving conflicts.

Over the next two weeks, in plenary sessions and at side-events, the U.S. Delegation looks forward to a comprehensive implementation review of Human Dimension commitments. We hope to hear from governments and civil society organizations about their priority concerns and ideas for improvement.

Upholding the principles of the UN and the OSCE is the only sure path to a secure, successful future for all of us. The United States champions these bedrock principles, and we stand in solidarity with human rights and democracy defenders across this region who, often at great personal risk, challenge governments to live up to them. We are inspired by your courage.

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