

Chairman Alcee L. Hastings
Remarks
U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing
on
“U.S. Priorities for Engagement at the OSCE”
December 8, 2020

It is a pleasure to welcome our witness, Ambassador Philip T. Reeker, Senior Bureau Official, to testify before the Helsinki Commission on “U.S. Priorities for Engagement at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).” I want to thank you, Ambassador, for the guidance and direction you have so ably provided to those in your Bureau and throughout the State Department during your tenure. Dedicated public service, in my view, is to be commended.

In addition to the challenges posed by the pandemic, we are facing crises within the OSCE region, diminished collective security in Europe, and an OSCE that has been weakened by long-term vacant leadership positions. Mr. Ambassador, I know I can count on you to work together with the Commission to address these issues and also to work cooperatively with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA).

Before I delve into the challenges, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the value of some of the diplomatic tools provided by our participation in the OSCE. I am pleased that the United States and 16 other countries invoked the “Moscow Mechanism” which, despite the failure of Belarusian authorities to cooperate, resulted in an in-depth, publicly available report detailing Alexander Lukashenko’s efforts to imprison the opposition, steal the vote and carryout “massive and systematic” human rights abuses with complete impunity. Lukashenko’s actions are not a surprise to me. I first traveled to Belarus in 2006 when, as President of the OSCE PA, I led the OSCE’s election-monitoring mission for the presidential election. I returned to Minsk in July 2017, for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Annual Session. I found that Lukashenko, like other autocrats, was not interested in the dreams of his people. His top priority was staying in power and now we know, he would seek to stay at any cost, including inflicting grave harm on his own people.

The Moscow Mechanism report provides an objective source of information which details Lukashenko’s criminal behavior, giving the international community the agreed basis on which to act. Mr. Ambassador, I call on you today to do more to support more extensive documentation of the crimes committed by the Lukashenko regime with a view to informing additional measures participating States can engage in to support democratic institutions, ending the injustices being suffered by the Belarusian people, and fostering accountability of those responsible for torture and other human rights abuses.

Open Skies is an important arms control agreement that significantly reduces the risk of armed conflict. The principles of military transparency embodied by the treaty flow from the same fundamental commitments that led to the creation of today’s OSCE. The Administration

withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, effective November this year, undermining U.S. security interests.

As I said when the Administration's intent to withdraw was first reported, the Treaty has underpinned transatlantic security for decades, and historically enjoyed bipartisan support precisely because of its contributions to our security and that of our allies and partners. I am concerned that the decision to withdraw was made more from an ideological opposition to arms control agreements than because of any fatal lack of compliance by other countries. I am also concerned that the Administration's actions did not comply with a legal requirement to notify Congress. Mr. Ambassador, if you continue in your role in the next Administration, I call for your assistance in exploring how the United States can reengage in the Open Skies Treaty as part of a broader return to leadership in the transatlantic community.

In our discussion of U.S. priorities for engagement at the OSCE, we must also address the challenges of the OSCE as an organization. Since July, the OSCE has been deprived of four key leadership officials by some OSCE participating States uncomfortable with the commitments to democratic institutions, the rule of law, media pluralism, and free and fair elections they have freely undertaken. Fortunately, the foreign ministers of OSCE participating States last week agreed to the appointment of a new Secretary General and new leadership in the other three positions. We must now find a way to avoid having them shy away from critical work in the hope of avoiding a repeat of this situation three years from now and to better protect the independence of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, in the Representative on Freedom of the Media.

I would like to recognize the work of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, which I believe plays an important role in international diplomacy. Strong parliamentary diplomacy has been a hallmark of this commission since it was created. Having previously served as the president of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, I know the Assembly can be an extremely useful venue for introducing new issues and concerns that ultimately need to be addressed by the OSCE itself in Vienna. Efforts to combat trafficking in persons, to respond to anti-Semitism, racism and other forms of intolerance in society and to defend freedom of the media became central to the OSCE's work based on initiatives coming from the Parliamentary Assembly. If OSCE consensus decision-making only allows an expression of concern with the situation in and around Ukraine, the OSCE PA can condemn Russia's clear, gross and uncorrected violation of all 10 Helsinki Principles in its aggression against Ukraine. The latter reflects the overwhelming sentiment of the vast majority of the governments and the public in the OSCE region.

Last week, I joined 51 former OSCE Chairpersons-in-Office, Presidents of the OSCE PA, Secretaries General and other Heads of Institutions of the OSCE, to support an initiative entitled, "OSCE Call for Action: Reaffirming a Common Purpose." It aims to stimulate the work of the OSCE and increase the political attention to it. Additionally, the document reaffirms the importance of governments implementing their key commitments and proposes a set of considerations aimed at strengthening the role of the organization in addressing the contemporary challenges, including through the promotion of genuine political dialogue.

Finally, Mr. Ambassador, I want to urge self-examination to be an element of the U.S. approach to the OSCE. Why? First, because we are not perfect, and we should therefore not pretend to be. Second, in being forthright and honest, we can also more effectively correct misperceptions others may have. Third, we can set an example for others to emulate.

Many participating States have been far too quick to deny shortcomings in their own implementation records. In this year of protest and rage over systemic racism in this country, the Helsinki Commission held a series of hearings on “Human Rights at Home.” As we did, we heard some European countries also begin to acknowledge the racism of their own, often colonial, histories. We are all better as a result. Consequently, I have introduced legislation recognizing the contributions and situation of black Europeans, as well as the LITE Act - legislation calling for the creation of a transatlantic institute focused on reaffirming and strengthening democratic principles and values in the West. Now is also the optimal time to expand transatlantic programs the Commission launched with the State Department that advance inclusive societies and support diverse civil society and political leaders.

Mr. Ambassador, I look forward to hearing from you today and I hope this hearing will form the basis for even closer cooperation between the State Department and the Helsinki Commission.