



**UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE
(U.S. HELSINKI COMMISSION)**

Hearing on “U.S. priorities for engagement at the OSCE”

**Tuesday, December 8, 2020
10:00 AM**

Senator Roger F. Wicker, Co-Chairman

Well, thank you very much, Senator Cardin, my dear friend and colleague. We are delighted that the European Union has taken a great step in the right direction with the Global Magnitsky Act.

Thank you for your leadership, Mr. Ambassador, of the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, and the cooperative spirit your bureau has demonstrated with the commission. Hearing directly from an administration official is very important to us. And I do appreciate my friend, Senator Cardin, mentioning the 30th anniversary of the Charter of Paris. This is a good opportunity for us to stop and assess how the principles of peace, unity and democracy are holding up today, three decades after they were agreed to by participating states.

As we examine U.S. priorities for engagement in the OSCE, I want to emphasize the importance of looking to the future. Moving forward, the organization should focus its activities where it can have the greatest impact, where it can prevent conflicts or democratic backsliding, and where there’s real opportunity and political will to achieve reform. The United States should direct the organization’s work to U.S. priorities – such as instability in the Western Balkans and reforms in Uzbekistan.

Mr. Ambassador, the Western Balkans are in your portfolio today, and your previous assignments have made you an expert in the region. I, too, have a deep interest in the Western Balkans, as has this Commission for many years. The United States and our allies have invested heavily in building peace, stability, and democracy in all Balkan countries, including through the

OSCE and its strong leader presence. Although some of these countries have made progress, others lag behind.

In July of 2018, I led a nine-member congressional delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, where we emphasized the need to focus more on the individual rather than collective human rights, and to make ethnicity a less significant and divisive factor in government and society. Having just commemorated the 25th anniversary of the Dayton Agreement, which ended the Bosnia conflict, I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on the prospects for more genuine progress in the country. How can we further engage the OSCE to strengthen the progress – the process of democratic reforms and to fight against corruption? And also, can you tell us the prospects for regional stability?

Looking further east, let me mention that Uzbekistan is another country of great interest to the commission, and also to my home state of Mississippi. Uzbekistan partners with the Mississippi National Guard and collaborates with our state research institutions, especially in agricultural economics. Uzbekistan has pursued an ambitious reform agenda under the leadership of President Mirziyoyev.

Positive steps include releasing political and religious prisoners, registering more religious organizations, maintaining the ban on police raids against religious communities, allowing access to previously banned websites, reversing currency restrictions, and putting in place mechanisms to make government more responsive and accountable. It is one of the few participating states that asked the OSCE for more assistance, including requesting a joint review of its draft religion law by the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo announced just yesterday that he had removed Uzbekistan from the special watch list for countries that have committed severe religious

freedom violations. This is a very positive sign. I look forward to signs of continued progress, including working with ODIHR and the Venice Commission, to incorporate their recommendations more fully into the draft religion law so that it complies with Uzbekistan's OSCE commitments and international obligations.

Uzbekistan's future support for the development of civil society, independent media, the judicial system, and a truly multiparty electoral system will also be important markers of reform. But I am delighted at this week's development, and they're worth a mention. Yet, despite the OSCE's expertise and examples of positive cooperation, the OSCE continues to have only a small presence on the ground. I'd like to hear your views, Mr. Ambassador, on what more can be done by OSCE and by our own country to advance Uzbekistan's progress. In particular, will the United States use its resources and influence within the OSCE to increase activities substantially in Uzbekistan?

The United States supports the OSCE for one paramount reason: it is an effective tool to advance American interests. We can be sure that all decisions taken at the OSCE reflect U.S. views because all decisions require consensus. It is worth noting that the cost of U.S. participation is much less than some other organizations. And I would argue the benefits are greater. The OSCE embodies the core values we share with our European partners and provides a platform for working together to address crises in the OSCE region, inhabited by 1.2 billion people.

So, Mr. Ambassador, thank you very much. Thank you, Senator Cardin, for your leadership. And I look forward to the testimony.