

**Commission on Security & Cooperation in Europe:  
U.S. Helsinki Commission**

**Helsinki on the Hill**

**“In the Beginning”**

**Guests:**

**Stacy Hope, Communications Director,  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

**R. Spencer Oliver,  
Former Secretary General, Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for  
Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), 1992-2015;  
Former Chief of Staff, U.S. Helsinki Commission, 1976-1985**

**Host:**

**Alex Tiersky, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and  
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TIERSKY: Hello and welcome to Helsinki on the Hill: A series of conversations hosted by the United States Helsinki Commission on human rights and comprehensive security in Europe and beyond.

I'm your host Alex Tiersky. I'm a senior policy advisor on the Helsinki Commission staff. I am so pleased to have with me today the Helsinki Commission's intrepid Communications Director Stacy Hope. Welcome, Stacy.

HOPE: Hi Alex. Thanks for having me join you today.

TIERSKY: Well Stacy, I can't thank you enough for being here with me today. We are inaugurating a brand-new vehicle for Helsinki Commission communications – a new podcast series and you are my partner-in-crime in pulling this all together and pulling it off. Thanks again for joining me for this new adventure.

HOPE: I'm really happy to do it. I think this is probably one of the most innovative ways for the commission – although, not necessarily for other organizations as a whole – to reach out to some new listeners, new audiences and get some new voices on Helsinki Commission issues out there. Alex, thank you for volunteering for being a host for these discussions.

TIERSKY: It's a pleasure. Of course, I'm really happy to do it. I couldn't be more excited. This format, as they say, has a real potential for us to complement the rest of what we do in terms of publications, events, hearings, fact-finding visits. This is a whole new way of communicating for the Helsinki Commission. We're a bit late to the game, but we are excited to be a part of it and part of the conversation.

Stacy, look, speaking of the kinds of things that we do, I thought one of the first things that we should do in opening this very first episode is a short conversation for our listeners about what is the Helsinki Commission? What do we do?

TIERSKY: I know you have done some terrific work on our website, in particular, putting together a frequently asked questions document. I know we tend to get some strange ones. Why don't you hit some of the highlights for us from the frequently asked questions document?

HOPE: Sure. The Helsinki Commission is actually formally known as the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. We're an independent federal commission and a little bit of an unusual animal in our particular space. We are made up of commissioners from both the executive branch and legislative branch.

On the legislative side we are bipartisan and bicameral. So, we have representatives from both the house and the senate side. Our primary work is promoting human rights, military security and economic cooperation in the 57 participating states of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. With that, I should say that we aren't limited just to Europe but the OSCE also includes countries in Central Asia, the United States and Canada as well as Mongolia.

TIERSKY: Stacy, are we based in Finland? The Helsinki Commission?

HOPE: (Laughs.) No, you'd be surprised how many times I get that question and how many times people ask me how I'm enjoying work in Finland. We're actually based here in the Ford House Office Building on Capitol Hill. The reason that we're called the Helsinki Commission is that we take our name from the location where the original 35 participating States of the OSCE gathered to sign what is formally known as the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation on Europe.

TIERSKY: The famous Helsinki Final Act.

HOPE: Indeed. So, we are – I have been to Helsinki on commission business and it's a lovely place, but we spend most of our time in Washington, D.C.

TIERSKY: We love the Ford Building. All right, Stacy, thanks for clarifying some of that for us. Listen, all of this about our organization is all pretty theoretical. I was hoping you could give us a sense of the kinds of things the Helsinki Commission does maybe by going through some of the highlights of what you thought was our most interesting work.

HOPE: Me personally, I think the most striking opportunity I had as a staffer here was to meet a gentleman named Muhammad Bekjanov. My very first briefing when I joined the Commission in 2014, we focused on those who were imprisoned in Uzbekistan, whether they were political prisoners, whether they were being persecuted for their religious beliefs, what have you. One of our panelists at that event was Muhammad Bekjanov's daughter. And her presentation was beyond compelling. She really put a human face on the more abstract policy implications of what we do and what countries are obligated to do under their Helsinki commitments.

TIERSKY: It's about people. It's about individuals.

HOPE: It is. It's about their stories and the real-life impact that policy decisions have on them. So, I was beyond excited to welcome Muhammad Bekjanov to our offices in person. He was freed last year. And it was really a concrete example of how the work we do has consequences and, in this case, a very positive outcome.

The second thing that really struck me was our chairman along with Representative Eliot Engel nominated a woman named Natasa Kandic for the Nobel Peace Prize. She's somebody that the Commission has known for quite some time and has spent the majority of her time since the 1990s documenting human rights violations that were associated with the break-up of the former Yugoslavia. I mean, this is a woman who's really dedicated her life to righting the wrongs that occurred in that terrible conflict. And the opportunity to submit her for the type of recognition that the Nobel Peace Prize offers was really – it was very exciting and it was an honor to me as well. And once again, it is about the humanity behind our policy work that really keeps me excited about coming to work on a daily basis.

TIERSKY: That's great, Stacy. These are individuals of course who would potentially make great guests in future episodes of this podcast. But these are exactly the kinds of stories we would like to highlight as part of this new vehicle that we're launching.

My portfolio with the Helsinki Commission typically has to do with political military issues but also counterterrorism, cyber security – a whole range of different issues. But, a couple of real highlights for me were helping to organize a hearing that Senator Wicker chaired that featured members of the House and Senate on a bipartisan basis, holding a hearing on the territorial integrity of Georgia, 10 years after its 2008 war and the occupation of more than 20 percent of its territory by Russian-armed forces. We had terrific witnesses and some new policy ground was broken at this hearing, in terms of how Georgia might approach and how NATO might approach there further developing their relationships and eventually NATO membership for Georgia.

A second tremendously compelling activity that I was fortunate to participate in was a staff-level visit where a couple of colleagues and I traveled to Ukraine in late October. We were able to travel to as far east as Kramatorsk and Slovyansk for discussions with internally displaced peoples – people who are really suffering from this senseless conflict. We had great conversations with the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission. They are doing terrific work in highlighting violations of the cease fire and trying to find ways to help the humanitarian situation there. It was a really remarkable visit. At that opportunity, we also took some time to have discussions and interactions with the Roma minority in Ukraine that had faced some difficulties and some attacks in Ukraine in order to highlight that particular issue, which I think is a demonstration of the kind of approach that the Helsinki Commission can take. The sense of comprehensive security, which security isn't really just political military in nature. It's not quote-on-quote hard security, but it also includes elements of human rights, the treatment of minorities and these kinds of issues.

Clearly, Stacy, there's a lot of stories we can tell through this vehicle.

HOPE: Oh, absolutely. I mean we cover something like 36 different issue areas in 57 different countries, so the stories are out there, they're waiting to be told. They're compelling and interesting. And I hope our listeners will enjoy them as much as I do.

TIERSKY: That's great, Stacy. And thanks again for being my partner-in-crime as I say in trying to pull all these discussions together and deliver them to our listeners.

Listen, we've set the context I think a bit for our conversation. I'd like to turn to who I think is – could not be a better guest for us to launch these series of discussions – these discussions with for our very first episode.

HOPE: Yes, that's right. He is indeed a perfect guest for this. He's an institution within Helsinki Commission history and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's development. I think his insights will be extraordinarily compelling and provide a great introduction to our podcast series.

TIERSKY: Well, Stacy, of course we are of course talking about the esteemed, the famous Spencer Oliver. Dear listeners, Spencer, for those of you who may not have had the opportunity to interact with him directly or in a policy discussion, Spencer Oliver served as the Helsinki Commission's first staff director and general counsel. He essentially built up our professional home from the ground up. And he played an instrumental role in ensuring the commission would have an impact in the real world, which as we've been discussing, Stacy, really is the point of the work that we do.

We have had a great conversation. We put it on tape. I could not be more thrilled to share it with you now. Before we actually get to that recording, I'd like to give our listeners a little more context on his background. Spencer Oliver, in addition to playing a crucial role in the processes that not only created the Helsinki Commission but what is now the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, as well as the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, Spencer served 22 years as a staff member in the United States Congress. He was not only our chief of staff but he also served as a – I believe for eight years as chief counsel for the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives. Crucially, he also served as the first secretary general of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly from 1992 to 2015.

Listeners, I think you're going to get a lot out of this conversation. Both in terms of the history of the work that we do and also how to make a real world difference in Washington. He's a fascinating individual and I look forward to sharing this with you.

With that, let's go to the tape.

TIERSKY: Hello. Welcome, listeners. It is a gray, dreary day on Capitol Hill, but we are honored to have as our very first guest on the podcast Spencer Oliver, who has braved the elements to be with us this morning and will hopefully shed some light on, as I say, a gray and dreary day here.

I've already given you some information about Spencer's biography. But let me say as he sits here before me how much we appreciate – that he is a legend here in the halls of Congress, and certainly in the halls of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, a true protagonist in our shared history. He served as the first chief of staff and general counsel for the Commission, and someone who, in a broad sense, has literally been at the creation of not only institutions but also impulses that continue to animate U.S. foreign policymaking to this day.

Spencer, welcome. Thanks, again, for being with us this morning. We are thrilled to have you help us launch this new initiative of ours, an effort through podcasting to share the work of the Helsinki Commission in a new way. Obviously as an initial conversation with you, we really wanted to start with a roadmap for how we got to where we are, and what animates the U.S. Helsinki Commission. So, Spencer, with that, I want to dive in.

And the first question I want to ask you has to do with your own personal history. I'm really curious to hear, you've been a passionate advocate for human rights and foreign policy for your entire career. Where did that come from?

OLIVER: Well, thank you very much, Alex. First of all, it's a great pleasure to be here. It's always a great pleasure to talk about the Helsinki Commission and the Helsinki Final Act, which is a great part of my life.

My personal background, my father was a trade union leader, a labor organizer. And we were – he was organizing unions in the south in the 1930s and 1940s. So I came to the concern about human rights in that vein. And he also was one of the economic and labor advisors – the economic and labor advisor to the Marshall Plan, to try to rebuild trade unions and to rebuild Western democracy in Europe after World War II. So I heard a lot of that around the dinner table. So it was – it gave me the impulse to be involved in public affairs, and particularly in this area.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, you clearly – you come at this commitment obviously from a very early age.

Well, let's dive right into the work that we're all about, that you have been so instrumental in throughout your career. The United States Helsinki Commission, of course, our mandate by law is to monitor the implementation of the commitments made by a whole range of countries under the Helsinki Final Act. Now, I'm hoping you can help our listeners, who might not be familiar with this groundbreaking international agreement, understand exactly what it was, how we got to it, and what its impact has been.

OLIVER: Well, the Helsinki Final Act was the culmination of many years of negotiation between East and West at the height of the Cold War. It was an effort to try to bring all sides, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as we say, to the table to try to discuss the further development of Europe and cooperation in Europe. Of course, one of the main highlights of it was the human rights provisions, which were virtually unprecedented in international agreements of that kind. And it took 22 months in Geneva to negotiate the Helsinki Final Act, which included parts of it that were – committed the participating states to observe human rights and fundamental freedoms, and to allow freedoms to travel, information to be obtained, and dialogue to take place, economic cooperation, security issues.

But basically, it was a breakthrough particularly in the field of human rights because this was something that many people at the time saw as the opening to bring down communism, because human rights was not observed. It was observed only in the breach under the Communist governments in the East. And so it was an opportunity to try to hold their feet to the fire about those promises they made in Helsinki about what they would do. And it was – it was – it was unique. It was all of the – it was 35 countries. All of the countries of Europe, the Soviet Union, and including the United States and Canada, which was one of the initial issues that had to be resolved before they ever sat down at the table, and that was a recognition that the United States and Canada had an interest in the security of Europe.

TIERSKY: Of course, yeah.

OLIVER: So it was a – it was a landmark achievement, although at the time some people in the United States thought that it was a sellout.

TIERSKY: Really?

OLIVER: Because they thought that it was a recognition of Soviet hegemony over Eastern Europe. So you had many of the diaspora in the United States from Eastern Europe – Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and so on, who felt that this was a recognition that the Soviet Union could continue to control these countries. They didn't really realize, I think, at the time the possibilities that – for development that were given by the Helsinki Final Act in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

TIERSKY: Right. Those proved to be quite critical in the ensuing decades. Can you tell us a little bit more about that domestic political context? As the Final Act – my understanding is there wasn't a lot of transparency about the negotiations as they were underway. So there wasn't quite clear understanding of what might come out in the Final Act. And as it was proposed for signature, what was the domestic context?

OLIVER: Well, it was negotiated behind closed doors, without any transparency or public observance of what was going on. So the only people who knew what was going on in the negotiation were the governments that were sitting at the table behind closed doors. So it wasn't until after the Helsinki Final Act was published and they met at a summit in 1975 in Helsinki that the world saw what was there. And of course, there was this great distrust of this process because it had been an initiative of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union and Poland, since the 1950s. There was something called an All European Security Conference, which of course initially meant all of Europe and not the United States and Canada.

So there was a lot of suspicion about it and a lot of negative reaction at first. Wall Street Journal had a headline saying, Gerry Don't Go, urging president Ford not to go to Helsinki. But some of us who had been involved in this peripherally in earlier – in earlier times saw the possibilities. And Millicent Fenwick, who was an American congresswoman from New Jersey who went to Moscow shortly after the Helsinki Final Act was signed and met with the dissidents – Anatoly Sharansky, Yelena Bonner, and people from the Moscow monitoring group – was told by them that if they kept those promises in the human rights, fundamental freedoms in basket three, that then it would change the whole nature of society in these communist countries. So Millicent came back to Congress and introduced legislation in effect creating the Helsinki Commission and ensuring that not only did they monitor the implementation of the final act, but they concentrated on the implementation of human rights.

So that was the – that was the beginning. And it was – it was a great – a great step forward, actually. The State Department very much opposed the – very much opposed the Helsinki Commission, because they thought we were interfering in their turf. And only the diplomats could do this. But because of the strong support from NGOs, National Conference on Soviet Jewry, the Joint Baltic Committee, the Ukrainian-American Association and these people, they mobilized their constituencies. And not a single congressman or senator was willing to vote against the Helsinki Commission, even though Henry Kissinger opposed it vigorously, and even tried to get the president to veto the legislation after it was passed. And fortunately, the

legislative liaison for the White House told Secretary Kissinger that if it passed unanimously in both houses a vote was useless.

TIERSKY: Yeah. Well, Spencer, I love this thread that you've drawn for us from a negotiation that culminated in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act between governments, not a lot of transparency, Kissinger suggesting that there wasn't much to it, to then a realization by dissidents in the Soviet Union that this was the way to hold their own government's feet to the fire and help their situation. That that then gets transmitted to a member of the United States Congress who's traveling abroad, and ultimately supported in the creation of the Helsinki Commission, which to this day is monitoring that very same agreement.

OLIVER: Well, it was much wider than that, Alex. The whole initiative for the All European Security Conference, and what eventually became the Helsinki Final Act, came from the East. It came from the Warsaw Pact. And the Russians regarded it as a great Brezhnevian accomplishment of his diplomacy. So they published the full text of the Final Act in every one of these countries in the daily newspapers. And the people in the East read the whole thing. And they thought, wow, this means that I can travel, that I can read things from the United States and the West. So their reaction was very positive, and they saw all sorts of possibilities. While in the West, people really didn't know very much what it was about because they promised that they would publish it in their leading journals, but the United States, of course, having private press, nobody was going to publish a, you know, 75-page document.

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) The Soviets didn't have that limitation.

OLIVER: So but it was – it was – it had a tremendous impact in the East. And if there was ever the result of unintended consequences, it was that, because populations took it very seriously and thought that this was a great opening for them to have more freedom and more opportunity.

TIERSKY: Spencer, that's terrific. Can we think now a little bit in a broader scope about the Helsinki Commission, which was created in 1976, as you said at the initiative, of Congress – Representative Millicent Fenwick. You were the Commission's first chief of staff, general counsel. You have either been a part of the Commission's work or worked alongside the Commission in any number of contexts for decades. Can you talk to us a little bit about your perspective on how the work of the Helsinki Commission has impacted U.S. foreign policy writ large, but also has participated in these discussions with other signatory states of the Helsinki Final Act?

OLIVER: Well, I think the most important thing was that the Helsinki Commission, particularly Congressman Dante Fascell who was the first chairman of it, are greatly responsible for the human rights component of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy, because it was – it was Dante Fascell, who urged Carter and his – and his team to include human rights in the – as an integral part of their foreign policy, and with strong support from Hubert Humphry, who really at a meeting at the Smithsonian early on during the transition, and when Dante Fascell asked – said that they should include this, Hubert Humphry slapped the table and said, by golly, Dante's right. And there was strong support around the table.

So human rights became a much bigger part of Jimmy Carter's foreign policy than you had thought it might be during the campaign. And also as a result of Fascell's effort, they created the assistant secretary of state for human rights bureau. Appointed Pat Derian, a civil rights activist from Mississippi, as the first assistant secretary of state for human rights. And she was a fantastic leader in that field. And of course, they also integrated – because of Fascell's efforts and his relationship with Secretary of State Cy Vance – they integrated the Commission and its staff with great expertise into the follow-up process of the Helsinki process, and made it an integral part in sharing the leadership of the delegations to all of the follow-up meetings thereafter in Belgrade and in Madrid and other places.

So the Commission had a staff of people who spoke many languages, had education in international affairs, in Soviet affairs, in East European affairs. And we had expertise that nobody else had. Even the expertise in the European Bureau of the State Department couldn't match the expertise of the Helsinki Commission staff when it was created in 1976.

TIERSKY: So some real added value from the get-go. You've alluded already to some of the tension inherent in the discussions about the Final Act itself between the executive branch and what people on – both in other parts of the government but also outside government were feeling about the act and its potential. I wonder if you might talk a little bit about, you know, it hasn't always been smooth sailing between the role of the Helsinki Commission and obviously the elected officials that make up the bulk of its membership, and the executive branch on these issues. How has that played out over time? To what extent has the executive branch been willing to recognize that significant expertise that resides with the Commission and the commissioners? And –

OLIVER: Well, Alex, I mean, initially the State Department, particularly Henry Kissinger, absolutely totally opposed to the Helsinki Commission and they tried to do everything they could to block its organization, its implementation, and its participation in the process. But because of Dante Fascell, who was an extraordinary man and who was the leader of the – of the Helsinki Commission – and probably, I think, the most popular member in the whole U.S. Congress with enormous influence. He was able to overcome the resistance of the State Department bureaucracy even though they tried every trick in the book. (Laughter.) I think we outmaneuvered them to get security clearances, to get office space, to get access to diplomatic cables, to get participation in the delegations and the review conferences. And they opposed us every step of the way. And we won every one of those battles.

And the Helsinki Commission became an important force – not only internationally but also on Capitol Hill, because we could have hearings and you would have the secretary of state or deputy secretary or assistant secretaries of state coming up and testifying in public before the Helsinki Commission, which gave it a lot of prestige. It gave visibility to the Helsinki process. It gave visibility to the Helsinki Commission. And it just encouraged us to go as far as we could in this field.

TIERSKY: I know you did, having had a bit of a sense of that history. To what extent do you think some of that tension and some of this – you know, whether it was Kissinger or

others around him as well – this idea that this is all stuff that we need to leave to the diplomats. This is executive branch stuff. What does Congress want to come and meddling in all of this business for?

OLIVER: Well, that was certainly – that was certainly their attitude, Alex. But they also spread that attitude to our European allies. So when we went to Belgrade, I mean, the State Department people sort of were whispering in the ear of our European NATO allies – look, these guys, we're sorry they're here, we – but we couldn't do anything about it. But they're not really going to have a lot of influence. And so they didn't treat us very well at first. And of course, there was also the constant tension between the Helsinki Commission and the State Department, because the diplomats believed that diplomacy should be left to diplomats and that elected politicians should not involve themselves in it. And so it was – it was a struggle which continued for a long time, and particularly with our allies. We had – we had difficulty even communicating with some of our allies.

But one story that I – that I love to tell is that there was a man named Berndt von Staden who was the national security advisor to the German government for years. He was, like, Germany's Henry Kissinger. During this – during this period of time when – during when the Helsinki Commission was created, when we went to Belgrade, the other follow-up meeting in Madrid. And he was staunchly opposed to our participation in these meetings. But after he retired, he – I the late '80s – he was teaching in Georgetown University. And he called me one day. He said, this is Berndt von Staden. Do you know who I am? (Laughter.) I said, yes, I do. And he said, well, I'd like to come see you.

So he came to see me. I was chief counsel of the Foreign Affairs Committee at the time. He said: I just wanted you to know that I think the Helsinki Commission is the greatest thing you ever created, and every country ought to have one. And I said – (laughter) – I said, Mr. von Staden, come with me. I took him upstairs to Dante Fascell's office and said: Tell him, because he's the man who did it. It was a – it was a great moment of triumph, where the recognition that we had so long sought and deserved finally came from someone like that.

TIERSKY: But, Spencer, if you're talking to someone who is not at all in our – in our field of following foreign affairs, or even particularly following governance closely, how do you explain why parliamentarians, elected officials, need to have a role in foreign policy writ large? How do you explain that to someone who just hasn't thought very much about it?

OLIVER: Well, human rights and fundamental freedoms, and issues like freedom to travel and free press and so on, are something that are fundamental to American democracy. And these congressmen and senators understand the concerns of their constituents, and particularly when you have such a wide diaspora in the United States of people whose families – they were first, or second, or third generation, or even immigrants from – fleeing communism, and from Eastern Europe. So they provided a very strong base, as did the Jewish community, because the issue of Jewish immigration was at the forefront in our relations with the Soviet Union in those days. So it was – it was the – it was the Jewish community and all of the diaspora of NGOs who formed an enormous constituency for the Helsinki Commission. And congressmen and senators recognized that very quickly.

TIERSKY: Spencer, let me – let me shift gears on you a little bit and ask you about one of – one of what I think are broadly considered your – one of your crowing achievements during your time as – at the Helsinki Commission. I'd like to talk to you about the questions that we faced as a – as a delegation, as a United States delegation, when we traveled to some of these review conferences after the Helsinki Final Act, where, of course, one of the fundamental principles of the entire process was that finally the various participating states could question each other's human rights commitments. So –

OLIVER: Alex, when we raised those questions – I mean, we – particularly when we criticized the Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact countries for their violations of human rights and their failures to live up to their commitments, they shot back at us with these arguments about the United States is corrupt, and it's run by big money and the Wall Street bankers, and there's corruption, and pornography, and racism, and all of these – discrimination against the Indians, blah, blah, blah. So what we did is we decided after the – after the Belgrade meeting that we would take a look at all the – all the things – all the questions they raised.

So the Helsinki Commission staff was mobilized, every single member on the staff, to do a domestic compliance report. And we took every single accusation that they had made, which we'd written them all down, and we investigated them. And we issued a report on U.S. implementation – a very lengthy report –

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) I happen to have that here in front of me.

OLIVER: You have a copy there.

TIERSKY: I flipped it. I see something like 370-some typed pages that –

OLIVER: We were – we were sending people to Indian reservations, and we were sending people – I went to the North Carolina State Prison and interviewed the head of the Wilmington Ten, the Reverend Ben Chavis, about how he had been unfairly, I think, convicted. And we got – we got him – his sentence commuted, and he was released. And he gave us the credit for that. But the thing was, we had this fantastic report. And when we got to Madrid to the next review meetings and the Russians were there, I was able to put that thing on the table and say, OK, you raised all these questions. Here's our response. Where's yours?

TIERSKY: (Laughs.) That must have been quite a moment.

OLIVER: It shut them up.

TIERSKY: So understanding our own record on the human rights components of the Helsinki Final Act commitments really has some relevance to how we're able to advocate for these same principles abroad.

OLIVER: Well, of course. I mean, it goes without saying that you have to be able to defend your position and defend your own practices in this regard. So the Helsinki Commission made sure that we looked at both sides.

TIERSKY: Spencer, you've been working in the – in the follow up on the Helsinki Final Act, not only through your leadership at the Helsinki Commission but of course, our listeners will have heard me say earlier, that you served for a tremendous amount of key time as both the creator and the leaders, the secretary-general, of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. So I'd like to get some thoughts, first of all, on the table about how your breadth of experience across these different institutions, interacting with what became the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, that's really today's manifestation of the Helsinki Final Act, how do you view that institution over the time that you've been watching it? You have this unique perspective.

OLIVER: Well, you know, Alex, I was the first secretary-general of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. So having had the experience with the Helsinki Commission and the U.S. Congress' involvement in the Helsinki process, it was very easy for me just to convert that into the same kind of development for parliamentarians in the OSCE or the CSCE Parliamentary Assembly. So they became – the parliaments became the same kind of watchdogs that the Helsinki Commission had been in the United States. And they worked very closely together. And the United States played a very leading role in the parliamentary – in the Parliamentary Assembly. People like Ben Cardin and Steny Hoyer and others were leaders of the Helsinki Commission and were recognized in Europe as people who knew something about these issues.

TIERSKY: Sure.

OLIVER: I mean, we educated not only our own Congress about these issues, in many ways, but we also interacted with our European counterparts. Parliamentary Assembly's been – it's had a lot of impact on the development of the CSCE and the OSCE because of the influence of parliamentarians. But there's still the tension between diplomats and parliamentarians in Europe, just as it is here. And in addition to that, one of the great weaknesses of the Helsinki process is the consensus rule. Consensus rule worked pretty well when we were all trying to move toward cooperation. But when you're in a confrontational position, now it's a little bit different. And the Soviets, or the Russians now, used their veto over things like personnel and budgets. Therefore, they're able to influence the development of the organization and influence what it does. And that's the weakness of the OSCE.

But it still is a valuable place where you have for the first time – and the only place outside of the United Nations – where Russians and Americans are sitting at the same table with every country from – in the former Soviet Union, Europe, and North America. So the dialogue is always valuable. And the Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris provide the basis for those discussions. Sometimes it becomes acrimonious and you still – there's still a lot of questions raised about how people treat their own citizens, which was the real – you know, the most important part of the Helsinki Final Act was not just about state-to-state relations, but also how states treated their own citizens. That was the commitment in the Helsinki Final Act that was unprecedented.

So those things are still in play. But you also – the OSCE has now evolved into a much bigger organization. I mean, all of the observers in – of elections and in post-conflict rehabilitation in the Balkans and in monitoring of the ceasefire in Ukraine, these are all OSCE operatives, OSCE staff. So you now have these institutions. You've got the Parliamentary Assembly headquartered in Copenhagen. You've got the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights headquartered in Warsaw. You've got the Office of High Commissioner of National Minorities in the Hague. And you have the secretariat and the Conflict Prevention Center in Vienna.

So these are institutions and they're – and they're staff, and they're full time. Whereas in the early days of the process, between 1975 and 1992, you didn't have a headquarters. It was just – it was – that's why it was called the conference, because it was based on periodic meetings. Now it's become institutionalized, so it's much different. But its fundamental purpose is still based on the promises that were made in Helsinki and in the Charter of Paris.

TIERSKY: So, Spencer, maybe as a – as a closing set of thoughts – this has been a terrific conversation. I'm really grateful to you for sharing your insight. But you've just told us everything continues – this entire process and the OSCE today continues to be based on the commitments made under the Helsinki Final Act. Now, you will know far better than I do that at the Helsinki Commission, among others, we cover continuously a stream of violations of these commitments, whether it's in the human rights field, religious minorities being marginalized or persecuted on the basis of counterextremism legislation, or an even more specific case, we are regularly talking about the Kremlin's violations of all 10 key principles of the Helsinki Final Act, the decalogue, given its activities – the war that it's fighting in Ukraine.

So the commitments are at a moment of, let's say, assault. The commitments are clearly not being fully implemented by all the participating states. Tell us why the process remains relevant today and why it may continue to have value going in to the future under these conditions.

OLIVER: Well, it's relevant because of the commitments that were made and the agreements that were made. I mean, these agreements could never be negotiated if you tried to negotiate them today. So it still represents a set of promises that are very difficult for any dictator or despot to recognize. So the Helsinki process and the OSCE holds their feet to the fire and calls them to account for the promises that were made by their governments. And the Helsinki Commission is particularly valuable because it holds public hearings in the U.S. Congress, which I can tell you capture the attention of any government that's criticized. You'll see – you know, you'll see – at many of your Helsinki Commission hearings, you'll see ambassadors from a lot of the states who know they're going to be criticized.

And now the famous Magnitsky Act emanated from, you know, legislation introduced by Ben Cardin – you know, the Senator Ben Cardin from Maryland, who was the author of the Magnitsky Act, which has now become an extremely valuable tool not only for relations with Russia, but also for relations with our governments around the world. And it has – it has expanded the idea of human rights beyond the Helsinki signatories and members of the OSCE.

It's now a worldwide application. And it all emanated from the Helsinki process or from the Helsinki Commission.

TIERSKY: Spencer, terrific. I'd like to close by thanking you not just for educating us today, but much more importantly for your energy, for your imagination, for your intellect, and, most importantly, for your commitment to this great cause that you have embodied for decades now. I look forward to seeing your continued impact on the issues that we'll be working on together going forward. Spencer Oliver, thank you, again, for your time. And thanks for being with us today.

OLIVER: Thank you very much, Alex. It was my pleasure and my honor.

(END)