

Helsinki Commission Hearing: “The Western Balkans: Perspectives from OSCE Field Missions”
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Statement for the Record
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I am deeply grateful to Helsinki Commission Co-Chairs Wicker and Smith, Commission members, and staff for the honor of addressing the topic of OSCE field operations in the Western Balkans, and for your continued focus on the region. Thank you again for your important May 2016 hearing on combating corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I should note that the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina has been in the hands of my successor, fellow American diplomat Bruce Berton, since the beginning of September. As requested by the Commission, my remarks are only based on my three-year tenure there. The views I express here are my own, and not necessarily those of the U.S. Government. I am not appearing here in my capacity as a US Foreign Service Officer.

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, with an extensive network of nine offices throughout the country and 320 dedicated professional staff, works every day with people in local communities as well as the most senior political leaders – and everywhere in between – to help keep the peace, protect fundamental rights, ensure the rule of law, and build prosperity.

The framework for OSCE activities is grounded in the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. Dayton and the constitution contained in it continue to serve as a key foundation for Bosnia and Herzegovina and its citizens. The Dayton Accords brought the OSCE to Bosnia and Herzegovina, giving the Mission a special role in conducting and observing the elections. The Mission’s role has evolved. The Central Election Commission took on the responsibility of running elections in 2002. With the goal of helping the country achieve its OSCE commitments and integration aspirations, the Mission has used its diverse and active field presence to engage in a variety of areas, seeking and keeping very close ties with institutions, organizations, and individuals at all levels of society.

The Mission’s work encompasses OSCE’s three dimensions – the politico-military, economic and environmental, and human dimensions – with the assistance and guidance of the annual Chairmanships-in-Office, the Secretariat, and other institutions, including the Parliamentary Assembly and this Commission. Its international partners include the Office of the High Representative, the United Nations, the European Union, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the Council of Europe, and bilateral embassies. The Mission’s work is expertly facilitated by strong media and policy planning teams, who advance and promote programmatic work in the areas of education, human rights, security cooperation, democratic governance, and the rule of law.

Recalling the Mission’s successful efforts and impact during my mandate, I would like to focus on three main areas: education; rule of law; and countering violent extremism.

Education

Within the international community, the Mission has the lead for education. The children of Bosnia and Herzegovina will only prosper if they have quality education: they need the skills, knowledge, and judgment to succeed in a modern and increasingly diverse world. Quality education requires well-trained teachers, professional administrators, effective curricula, up-to-date materials, safe conditions, and an ethnic and religiously inclusive environment.

Ethnic interaction is a vital element of the learning process. In the aftermath of the war, it is a reality that many people in Bosnia and Herzegovina define their identities by their language and religion. This does not justify ethnic segregation. Segregated schools in three Federation cantons are an obstacle. Discrimination by education authorities in Republika Srpska against the Bosnian language is a comparatively new and as-yet unsolved problem. A broader complication is the fact that numerous jurisdictions have distinct and separate responsibilities for education. Despite these factors, there are communities where the Mission found and encouraged examples of success; where diversity, tolerance, respect, and vision have led to improved social and educational conditions. Religious communities have also played a very positive part in these efforts.

A concrete example of the Mission's work was its immediate response to the secondary school students in Jajce, who joined forces in the summer of 2016 to block a new segregated school. With the OSCE Mission leading the efforts by the international community, we engaged both publicly and privately over months and at multiple levels to prevent the first new case of segregation in the country since 2002. The story gained national and international attention. While it is important to keep watching the matter, working together we convinced the authorities to make other steps instead. The ultimate credit goes of course to the students themselves, who showed incredible tolerance, maturity, and commitment to a common future.

Rule of Law

The cooperation of victims and witnesses is critically important for the successful prosecution of war crimes. The OSCE Mission to BiH plays an established role in this field, with the full support of the country's judiciary, as well as the victims and survivors, who in far too many cases have been denied justice for over 20 years.

Years of proven and effective relationships with judges and prosecutors and its professional expertise equip the Mission for engagement in other areas as well, including the prosecution of hate crimes. Separately, the Mission is a partner in efforts to combat trafficking in persons, and during my tenure expanded its capacity to fight corruption, in a project funded by the U.S. Government.

In June 2016, the Mission released a detailed, hard-hitting analytical report on the state-level processing of war crimes, where there had been a number of deficiencies. The analysis was hailed for its insight and practical recommendations. Again, the Mission brought about concrete results: the recommendations are indeed being implemented.

Combating Violent Extremism

Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen four terrorist attacks over the past seven years, resulting in the deaths of two soldiers and two policemen, as well as the wounding of a third policeman in the October 2011 attack on the U.S. Embassy. The country's authorities are working to do what they can, but Bosnia and Herzegovina is vulnerable. Given the deep scars left by the war, terrorist attacks could greatly damage the stability of the country if they lead to acts of revenge and a growing cycle of conflict.

The Mission takes advantage of its grass roots-level involvement throughout the country to make a difference: as in other areas, we see clear evidence of the essential role played by local communities. Having helped establish a series of over 30 Coalitions Against Hate across Bosnia and Herzegovina, local communities are natural allies in building mutual respect and joint community values. These are locally-constituted groups of individuals and NGOs dedicated to working with each other as neighbors to emphasize common rights and build broader respect and understanding throughout their communities. The April 2015 terrorist attack in Zvornik came as a shock to all of us. But we learned a valuable lesson: the local coalition there, together with the mayor and Islamic community, immediately called for calm and tolerance, and opposed any acts of revenge.

Given that example, and building on a project funded by the U.S. Government, the Mission integrated the fight against violent extremism as a permanent element of its security cooperation efforts, one joined by colleagues from all policy and programmatic areas.

The United States government has developed scenario-based, multi-stakeholder seminars to promote collaboration and disseminate good practices to regional, national, and community leaders. With U.S. government support, the Bosnian Ministry of Security partnered with the OSCE to conduct a very successful tabletop exercise in March of last year. The event helped build international coordination and whole-of-society collaboration. The OSCE is now following-up on the 2016 table top exercise by implementing a youth engagement CVE dramatic production contest, and will run TTXs at the municipal-level in 2018 to expand security partnerships to local community leaders.

Effectiveness

While past accomplishments – such as the supervision of elections from 1996 until 2002, and assistance with defense reform over ten years ago – set the stage, the Mission continues to build capacities at all levels and speak candidly about both opportunities and obstacles, the Mission proves its effectiveness and the depth of its engagement again and again. Particular strengths include:

- The diverse, expert, motivated workforce, women and men from across the country and many different OSCE participating States;
- The large network of field offices allows for constant outreach, flexible and tailored to practical opportunities, and builds enduring local contacts;

- The extensive media presence, fostered by a pattern of access to the press and defense of media freedom; and
- Recognition by the public that the Mission does not shy away from difficult tasks and issues, whether at the national or local level.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I remain very thankful to all of the colleagues at the Mission for enhancing stability and promoting reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thank you again for the important opportunity to discuss these issues. I look forward to your questions, and to hearing the views of my fellow panelists.