

Helsinki Commission Hearing: “The Western Balkans: Perspectives from OSCE Field Missions”
Wednesday, November 1, 2017

Statement for the Record
Michael M. Uyehara
Former Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

Dear distinguished members and staff of the Helsinki Commission, current and former colleagues of the OSCE, ladies and gentlemen,

I have worked closely with the Helsinki Commission since 2001, when I was a Belarus Desk Officer at the Department of State, and then continuing on during subsequent assignments at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv, Ukraine; as director for the office in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor covering the European and Eurasian region; and most recently as the Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia. During these assignments, I have become increasingly more impressed with the role played by the Helsinki Commission, a unique institution drawing together the Executive and Legislative branches and bringing together the Senate and House of Representatives from both sides of the aisle. The Helsinki Commission does wonderful work to highlight the human rights situation within the OSCE region and to draw attention to the work of the OSCE.

As the Deputy Head of the OSCE Mission, I traveled widely through Serbia, and took the opportunity, using my connection with the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, to speak at American Corners in the country on the topic of the U.S. within the OSCE and the OSCE’s role in support of Serbia’s development. Most of my audience were young, often university students or younger, and attending my talk to have the opportunity to hear a native English speaker. To break the ice, I would ask each member of my audience what they already knew about the OSCE. I was disappointed that the great majority of my audience knew nothing about the organization beyond its name. The common answer was either “I don’t know about the OSCE” or that “the OSCE promotes security and cooperation.” Given this level of ignorance about the role of the OSCE in a country where the OSCE has a mission, I am grateful to the Helsinki Commission, and particularly Bob Hand, for arranging an opportunity to publicize and to promote knowledge of the really great things that the OSCE, through its missions (what the OSCE refers to as “field operations”) does, specifically in the Western Balkans.

I should first emphasize that I offer my remarks as a private individual. I no longer have a connection to the OSCE and, while I remain an employee of the State Department, the views I express here are my own and not necessarily a reflection of U.S. policy, either toward the OSCE or toward the Balkans region broadly and Serbia specifically. That said, my observations and conclusions would probably not differ greatly from my views expressed in Vienna during meetings with representatives of diplomatic delegations to the OSCE or what my former boss, Italian diplomat Andrea Orizio, might state in his annual report to the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna.

You have already had the opportunity to hear from Jonathan Moore and Jeff Goldstein, both of whom I have known for many years and who are great friends of mine, so you should have

drawn a general understanding of the role of OSCE missions. Both of their countries, however, face specific challenges regarding democratization and governance. Serbia seems calmer, but I would draw your attention to the role played first by Yugoslavia and then Serbia with respect to the OSCE to underscore the importance of the work of the OSCE Mission to Serbia.

The OSCE has its roots in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), a series of meetings between NATO and Warsaw Pact member countries. While a manifestation of the Cold War confrontation, the CSCE also broadened its scope to include formally neutral and non-aligned countries and, as an acknowledged leader of the Non-Aligned Movement, Yugoslavia was an active participant in the CSCE negotiations that led to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act on 30 July to 1 August 1975. Partly in recognition of Yugoslavia's important role, the First Review Conference (formerly known as Follow-up Meetings), was held in Belgrade from 4 October 1977 to 9 March 1978. It provided a forum for discussion and agreement on a number of aspects of the Helsinki process.

In subsequent years, Yugoslavia and then Serbia became a special focus of the OSCE. On 8 July 1992, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), later re-designated as the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, was suspended from participation in the OSCE (the first time and only time to date that the OSCE employed the consensus minus one mechanism). The decision was taken on the basis of Yugoslavia's "clear, gross, and uncorrected violations" of OSCE human dimension commitments. FRY's participation was restored only on 7 November 2000. On 14 August 1992, the OSCE Missions of Long Duration was established for Kosovo, Sandjak, and Vojvodina; deployed in September; and subsequently withdrew in July 1993 when Yugoslav authorities refused to sign an MOU to prolong the mission. On 23 July 1998, the OSCE Technical Assessment Mission issued an assessment of the deteriorating situation in FRY and, on 15 October 1998, the OSCE established the Kosovo Verification Mission, which was closed in June 1999.

With this historical backdrop, we come to the establishment of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, which took place with a Permanent Council decision of 11 January 2001, just a few months after a popular movement saw the removal of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević on 6 October 2000. Unlike the Missions to Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Kosovo, the OSCE Mission to Serbia does not have an extensive network of field offices, but maintains just two, but important ones with respect to protection of national minority rights. One office is located in Bujanovac, in southern Serbia, in an area where the majority of ethnic Albanians reside. The second is in the city of Novi Pazar, in southwest Serbia, which has a concentration of ethnic Bosniaks.

Finally, to finish the historical narrative, I should observe that Serbia's rehabilitation with respect to the OSCE culminated in its holding of the 2015 OSCE Chairmanship-in-Office, during which, in my opinion, the country acquitted its responsibilities quite well.

Like other OSCE field operations, the OSCE Mission to Serbia's programs and activities are based on its mandate, which is part of the decision establishing it. Thus, it is worthwhile to cite the relevant language of the mandate here.

A subsequent Permanent Council decision 733 in June 2006 changed the Mission's title to the Mission to Serbia upon Montenegro's independence. The version that I will read incorporates the relevant changes to the mandate's language. The mandate states;

“The Mission, acting in close co-operation with the Government of the Republic of Serbia, will provide assistance and expertise to the Serbian authorities at all levels, as well as to interested individuals, groups and organizations, in the fields of democratization and the protection of human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. In this context, and in order to promote democratization, tolerance, the rule of law and conformity with OSCE principles, standards and commitments, the Mission will also assist and advise on the full implementation of legislation in areas covered by the mandate, and monitor the proper functioning and development of democratic institutions, processes and mechanisms. In particular, the Mission will assist in the restructuring and training of law enforcement agencies and the judiciary.

In addition, the Mission will provide assistance and advice in the field of the media.

The Mission will, in close co-operation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, provide advice and support in order to facilitate the return of refugees to and from neighboring countries and from other countries of residence as well as of internally displaced persons to their homes within the territory of the Republic of Serbia.”

The OSCE Mission's structure reflects the mandate. It has four programmatic departments: for Democratization, for Rule of Law and Human Rights, for Security Cooperation, and for Media. Briefly, the OSCE Mission seeks to help Serbia build strong, independent, accountable and effective democratic institutions. To do so, the Mission works with government institutions, civil society and the media in the areas of rule of law and human rights; law enforcement; democratization; and media development. It also works with other Missions in the region on joint projects and initiatives.

Through its programs, the OSCE Mission continues to provide added value in its core mandated fields through advice and expertise to its local partners to assist Serbia in becoming a rule-based, democratic society, where professionalism, accountability and meritocracy are deeply rooted and where the rights of every individual are protected by an independent and effective judiciary deriving its authority from a full separation of powers. The principles of partnership with the host country and national ownership of accomplishments guides the Mission's work in helping Serbia achieve full sustainability of its reform results. Adequate buy-in from the Serbian authorities and their full participation in the development and implementation of Mission programs ensure that these are targeted and topical.

Internally, the Mission strives to improve inter-Departmental co-operation, to reflect the increasingly cross-cutting nature of issues we deal with. For example, in the field of security sector reform, the Mission is shifting focus from a police-centered to a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, consistent with the OSCE holistic and systematic approach to security, linking reforms in the fields of criminal justice system, law enforcement, democratic control and community participation. It is also strengthening co-operation with OSCE institutions to

exchange expertise and deploy it in a mutually reinforcing fashion, maintain a high-level of cooperation with other field operations in the region; and engage in regional initiatives, including in tackling trans-national threats and trafficking in human beings through police cooperation, contributing to stability in the Western Balkans.

The OSCE Mission to Serbia has a robust presence in the country, with a staff of about 130 people. This puts the Mission on a par with the EU delegation and makes it much larger than most bilateral embassies, including those of OSCE participating States. While the OSCE Mission comprises a mix of international and local staff, with international staff accounting for about 20 percent of total staffing, the OSCE Mission's particular strength is its local employees. While the OSCE Mission's remuneration is competitive and generous, my personal impression is that the local staff are enthusiastic in carrying out their duties because they are, in the main, Serbian patriots. As patriots, they believe in the OSCE Mission's work and are deeply committed to the Mission's objective of helping Serbia to advance politically and to overcome the legacy of the past. With their native fluency in Serbian and their extensive networks within government and civil society, the OSCE Mission's Serbian employees effectively represent the OSCE Mission and enhance its reputation as a valuable partner for Serbia.

The staffing number does include security guards and drivers, but the bulk of the OSCE Mission's staff implements the Mission's programming. In short, the "tooth to tail" ratio is quite high. The support function, gathered in the Fund Administration Unit (FAU), is one of the leanest among OSCE field operations.

My general description of the OSCE Mission's work perhaps still remains rather general and abstract. To bring the accomplishments of the OSCE Mission into focus, I should describe three areas of the OSCE Mission's work – the new countering violent extremism project, the Follow Us initiative, and its work with youth. The three descriptions will make more concrete how the OSCE Mission is working with other OSCE field missions and improving inter-departmental coordination internally.

For quite some time during my assignment, I was frustrated by the scant attention that international donors were paying to the issue of countering violent extremism (CVE) in Serbia. Serbia had a handful of returning foreign fighters, who might have volunteered with ISIS in Syria, and there have been few or no cases of terrorist violence committed in the country. The international donor attention to the Balkans instead was focused on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where there were cases of terrorist violence and real cause for concern about the CVE potential. My argument, however, was that the CVE potential in Serbia was not zero. There are a significant number of unemployed and disaffected youth in Serbia, and not just among the Muslim populations of the Albanian and Bosniak minorities. While strict Muslim fundamentalism was gaining strength, particularly in the area in and around Novi Pazar, in the Bosniak region of southwest Serbia, thankfully, it had not translated into radical extremism. Nonetheless, I would argue with various interlocutors that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure. Just because Serbia did not have a problem now, we should carry out projects to counter violent extremism so that we would not have a problem in the future.

Thankfully, the UK government saw an intersection with a new funding mechanism and the CVE issue, which resulted in an offer to fund a CVE project for the OSCE Mission to implement. We ran with the vague UK expression of interest to develop a full-fledged project. Rather than focusing on Muslim-majority areas, taking heed of local leaders' concerns not to be stigmatized simply for being Muslim, we proposed a project that was national in scope, and took into consideration all manifestations of violent extremism, including threats from Serbian right-wing nationalism, some of whose supporters had joined the Russian-backed insurgency in Eastern Ukraine. Realizing that we should not channel our CVE activities in any specific OSCE Mission department, but that the CVE activities needed to encompass the broad mandate of the Mission, we positioned the management and execution of the project in the Office of Head of Mission, which would allow the project manager to task and work with all departments. This approach allows us to tackle the problem with a multi-faceted approach, which addresses primarily youth alienation in all of its manifestations.

The OSCE Mission supports the Follow Us initiative, started by the Mission to bring together prominent women, particularly women parliamentarians, from Belgrade and Pristina. In addition to providing financial support, in cooperation with the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, for meetings of the two groups, the OSCE Mission commissioned a series of documentaries of varying lengths to promote the accomplishments of the group and the benefit of having women from opposite communities speak to each other. The documentary has been screened for various audiences in both Serbia and Kosovo. The Follow Us initiative participants have most recently developed an action plan and an objective that includes mentoring the next generation of Serbian and Kosovo women leaders. As a result of their decision, the OSCE Missions to Serbia and in Kosovo funded a group of young women from Belgrade and Pristina to organize a caravan, where they, as a group, visited regional cities in Serbia and Kosovo, to describe the impact of the program bringing them together to connect simply as people. Using the Follow Us initiative as a template, the OSCE Mission is organizing a regional conference in Belgrade of women parliamentarians to allow them to discuss their common issues as women and as politicians.

During the Serbian chairmanship, Serbia designated a young Serbian woman as the Chair's representative on youth and security. The young woman happened to be working as an intern at the OSCE Mission. We extended her internship, and used her status within the Mission to support her travel to various events that she was obliged to attend in her new capacity, saving the Serbian OSCE Chair scarce resources, as well as furthering the professional development and capacity of an OSCE Mission intern. We kept her on subsequently on a contracted basis, which meant that she received a salary. We continue to work in the youth promotion area, a continuing area of OSCE Mission attention, with the three pillars on the Serbian side working on youth issues - the National Council, National Association of Youth Workers and the Association of Local Youth Offices. We also leveraged a Serbia-Albania rapprochement resulting from a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the Serbian and Albanian Governments in 2014 to promote greater understanding between the youth of the respective countries. We obtained funding for a Serbian-Albanian youth exchange, bringing Albanian and Serbian youth together to break down stereotypes that each has of the other. The OSCE Mission is examining opportunities to advance the initiative under the auspices of the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO), recently opened in Tirana and established by decision of the Balkans countries participating in the Berlin Process.

During the course of my adult career, I have worked basically for two organizations. For nearly ten years, I was an enlisted soldier and officer in the U.S. Army. And then, for slightly more than 30 years, I have been a Foreign Service Officer in the State Department. My secondment to the OSCE Mission was a unique foray into another organizational environment. I had the opportunity to work with talented and accomplished people of many nationalities, with dedicated and enthusiastic Serbians, and to gain an appreciation for the value of multinational diplomacy. I am honored to have the opportunity to speak to you, but I am also deeply grateful to have had the opportunity to work at the OSCE Mission to Serbia, one of the real highlights of a long and rewarding career. Thank you for your attention.