

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

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

**“Toward a Sustainable, Enduring, Democratic Peace: American Personnel
and the OSCE”**

Guests:

**Kavya Rajan, Director of Human Rights and Communities,
OSCE Mission in Kosovo;
Kelsey Harris-Smith, Political-Military Officer, Conflict Prevention and
Resolution Program, OSCE Mission to Moldova**

Host:

**Alex Tiersky, Senior Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe**

TIERSKY: Hello and welcome back 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.

Listeners, as those of you who tune in regularly know, the work of our commission aligns pretty directly with a major international body known as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE. One of the questions we here on the staff regularly get, and it's a legitimate one, is why does this organization matter? What relevance does it have to our friends and neighbors here in the United States?

Well, we can respond that clearly the United States supports the work of the OSCE.

In fact, over the years U.S. funding has generally supported between 11 and 14 percent of the OSCE's operating costs. And just to give you one example, in 2020 the total U.S. contribution – monetary contribution to OSCE activities amounted to more than \$30 million.

But the U.S. contribution to the OSCE is much more than budgetary. It's also the deployment or secondment of people, individuals who sign up to carry out the activities of the OSCE across its vast geographic expanse, who do the day-to-day work of trying to make the principles the organization is based on into a reality on the ground.

So listeners, in this episode of Helsinki on the Hill, we're going to bring you the voices of two who have heeded the call to serve with the OSCE. You'll hear about how a retired U.S. Army officer ends up working in Moldova, with previous OSCE stops in Ukraine and Tajikistan. And you'll hear about how an American is currently managing a team of some 200 in Kosovo to help establish a lasting peace in a region that has seen so much war. I can't wait to talk to them.

Without further ado, let's get under the hood, so to speak, of working with the OSCE. I'd like to bring in now Kavya Rajan and Kelsey Harris-Smith. Welcome to both of you. Thanks for joining us on Helsinki on the Hill.

Can I ask you both to introduce yourselves to our listeners and just tell us, for example, what's on your business card? Kavya, why don't you start for us?

RAJAN: Thank you, Alex. I am the director of human rights and communities at the OSCE Mission in Kosovo. And I'm based in our headquarters of Pristina.

TIERSKY: Thanks for calling in from Pristina. I appreciate it.

And Kelsey, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

HARRIS-SMITH: Yeah, sure. My name is Kelsey Harris-Smith. I am the political-military officer in the Conflict Prevention and Resolution Program of the OSCE Mission to Moldova. So I'm here in Chişinău, Moldova.

TIERSKY: Terrific. Thanks to you as well for calling in.

Kavya, can you give our listeners a sense of the scope of roughly how many Americans are part of the OSCE system?

RAJAN: Sure, Alex. Since 1992 the United States has seconded something around 6,000 Americans to OSCE operations. And these include election observation missions as well as field missions in participating States throughout the Balkans, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia.

TIERSKY: Could you tell our listeners what it means to be seconded? I'm not sure they would understand that term.

RAJAN: Sure. There is a process of recruitment that's twofold, I would say. The first is going through your national system to become a nominee from your participating State, in my case the United States. And then you go through the second round, where the OSCE selects you as their nominee for the final position.

TIERSKY: And, Kelsey, do you have a sense of, I don't know, in a given year – in a recent year how many Americans are in OSCE missions and operations?

HARRIS-SMITH: Well, about 100 – so, 96, to be exact – are in what are the field missions. So the missions that are out permanently assigned in Pristina, or Chişinău, or Dushanbe, or wherever. And in addition to that 96-odd people, there are 30 more who are serving in the OSCE's institutions, such as the secretariat – generally speaking our headquarters – the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, or the High Commissioner on National Minorities, which are respectively located in Warsaw and the Hague.

TIERSKY: Our listeners should also understand, this is now all fully separate in terms of personnel from the group of more than 30 staff members that are part of the U.S. Mission to the OSCE, what can also be thought of as an embassy to the international organization at the headquarters in Vienna.

Now, of course, you've all mentioned folks that are deployed and serving with the OSCE. I just want to take a moment to note that there was a U.S. citizen that our listeners have heard about on this podcast, Joseph Stone, who was an American serving with the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, who was tragically killed in 2017 when the vehicle that he was riding in struck a landmine in Russian-controlled territory.

Well, we've established that the U.S. is contributing, is sending not only its money but also its people to these missions, in a position to help the OSCE succeed in the various missions that the United States is advocating for. I'd like to turn to talking about you both, please. And I want to start with, first, the most basic question: How did you first learn about and eventually join the OSCE?

Kavya, why don't we start with you? What's your kind of origin story with the OSCE?

RAJAN: I studied international affairs and I did graduate school in Vienna, which is – as Kelsey was saying – the headquarters for the OSCE.

TIERSKY: And then what made you decide to actually try for a job within this organization?

RAJAN: I appreciated the rights-based and security-based and regional focus of the organization within the pantheon of international organizations. After my initial interest in the OSCE I remember reading this book on the rise of regional organizations in comparison to national and international, why regional organizations specifically are very effective.

I remember thinking back when I first had interest in the OSCE that that's what I liked about it, that it was – it was large enough and small enough, if that makes sense, and that it was very field-based. So it's a decentralized organization. It's – the power is in the main work – the programmatic work is in each of the missions.

TIERSKY: Kelsey, does that resonate with you?

HARRIS-SMITH: Yes. Although really, my personal – my personal path was more self-oriented, I'm sorry to say, perhaps. (Laughs.) I was in the Army. And as sort of a mid-career Army assignment, I worked as a military assistant to one of the military representatives to the then-CSCE, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in '91-'92. And we were working on finishing up some of the big arms control negotiations on the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, the Vienna document. And then I went on and did a number of arms control assignments after that.

A lot of these arms control regimes are organized under the OSCE. And so when I got out of the Army and I knew I wanted to continue working overseas, and I wanted to continue – I liked the multilateral system, and I liked working with a diverse bunch of people. And so working overseas, it was a good venue for me. And so I made some applications and I was accepted and haven't looked back.

TIERSKY: Now, you've had a number of positions in the OSCE system, is that right? Can you just briefly give us an overview of your various professional engagements with the OSCE?

HARRIS-SMITH: Sure. Well, as I say, I started in '91-'92 with the CSCE. I was a military assistant, so I was, you know, basically a glorified gofer. Then after I got out of the Army I went out to what was then called the Office in Tajikistan, where I was the OSCE's field representative in northern Tajikistan, in the Fergana Valley, which is this very long, fertile valley which is surrounded by – or, parts of it are in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Anyway, I was there for about four years, really interesting work – bunch of project activities and work there. Worked with such a wide variety of people, it was wonderful.

And then – in March of 2014, the OSCE deployed a – what was intended to be a small group of first responders to Ukraine in response to actually the Maidan event, shall we say. In

the course of that first month or so, the mission expanded, especially after the insurrections in the east started up. So I went back to Tajikistan. But then towards the end of 2014 I came back to the special monitoring mission, where I was for about four years in the operations section, ending up as deputy head of operations for 1,400 people – which for the Army is not much, but for the OSCE that's a lot of people.

And then I took a break for a while, and now I am back in the OSCE. I went back in the special monitoring mission, in their administration and finance department. So money management, administration. And then I moved over to where I am now, in the Mission to Moldova where, as I said, I am the political-military officer, which is a project management and monitoring position.

TIERSKY: What a terrific set of experiences.

Kavya, let me turn to you now. Could you tell us a little bit about the day-to-day work of the mission that you work for? How do the folks in your mission achieve the goals set out in the mandate?

RAJAN: I'll divide the answer into two areas – our field monitoring work, which is largely done in our regional centers, and the work that we do at the headquarters in Pristina. Examples of field monitoring work are trial monitoring. We have trained lawyers who follow trials that are of interest to the OSCE and monitor them to see that international human rights standards are met.

Then we have the work we do more centrally. And that has to do with analyzing the data that's often collected in the field. So we will, for example, analyze legislation. We'll look at key laws of interest for the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, and see where maybe there are gaps or lags, and offer that legal expertise, you know, in the drafting stage of laws, for example. And we write reports on topical areas.

TIERSKY: Kavya, could you – could give our listeners a sense of kind of the field mission's objectives? You spoke about experts who are working in the field. What outcomes are they looking for? What are they trying – other than reporting back to the participating States of the OSCE, what is it that they're trying to help with on the ground?

RAJAN: I would say stable, robust, peaceful societies, and all that that entails. You know, we have our departments that each contribute to that essential goal – whether it's democratization or security cooperation or human rights.

TIERSKY: And, Kelsey, from your current perch in Moldova, perhaps any of the previous OSCE engagements that you've had, does this – does this align with the kinds of responsibilities that you have had? Can you tell us a little bit about, for example, in Moldova, what does it – what are the main tasks that you have in a given week and what are the objectives that you're trying to carry out?

HARRIS-SMITH: OK. Well, the mandate, which is the job, if you will, of the mission to Moldova is to assist in the resolution of the Moldovan conflict. Which is a – which is about consolidation of the independence and sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova within its internationally recognized current borders, and reinforcement of their territorial integrity, along with an understanding, however, about a special status – for Transnistria, for the Transnistrian region.

In '92 they had a very brief shooting conflict – I mean, brief but horrendous in terms of human loss. Not like Ukraine, but bad enough for the people who were involved. And so our mission was established in 1992 to assist with the resolution of that. That's become what are called one of the protracted conflicts. And so we are here to help resolve that.

So what do we do? There is a security zone along the river, which is between Chişinău-controlled territory and Transnistria, and Tiraspol-controlled territory. And so we try to help them talk to each other. We monitor in the security zone, looking at possible sources of conflict or incidents of conflict, and we do reports on them and we try to assist with the resolution of those issues. We also do projects related to supporting that effort.

TIERSKY: It comes back to the overarching theme, I think, that Kavya first introduced to us, which is really the fundamental aspect of the work that you all seem to be doing is working towards a sustainable, enduring, democratic peace in the place that you are trying to contribute to.

I wanted to ask, you know, we're focusing in this particular episode on Americans who are serving in the OSCE. But of course, your colleagues are not all Americans, isn't that right? Kavya, who else is working with you in the field mission, for example?

RAJAN: We have national and international staff. Internationals span the range of the participating States of the OSCE. The participating States cover the North American countries, Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, broadly speaking.

TIERSKY: And, Kelsey, is that true also of your experience in the various OSCE missions, that they tend to be a whole range of different nationalities?

HARRIS-SMITH: Yeah, very much. In any – in any given mission the support staff, if you will – the finance, the drivers, the IT people, those are all national, local staff. They're hired from the – from the country where the mission is established. But then the project management staff, monitoring staff – if it's a mission with a monitoring task – those are generally international and they could be from almost anywhere.

TIERSKY: I'd like to shift to talking a little bit about what you find challenging and rewarding about the work that you do with and through the OSCE. Much of the world is still in the COVID pandemic. And I'm sure that's colored the way that you as professionals are able to engage with your counterparts. Other than the challenges of adapting to the pandemic, what are some of the – some of the real challenge that you face in carrying out the mandate, as you said,

Kelsey, of the mission that you're working for? What are the things that really make your jobs difficult on a day-to-day basis? Kelsey, why don't you start?

HARRIS-SMITH: Difficult is a very relative term. I mean, there are things that take more attention, but there's nothing that you can't overcome, in a certain sense. I mean, when I worked in Tajikistan I lived in my office. And so maintaining – and actually, now under home office I'm living in my office again, come to think of it. So, you know, maintaining that sort of work-life balance has been a challenge at times.

I mean, if I was to say what is the thing that I really feel that I have to really pay attention to, to work on, and that is always making sure that the money is going where the money is supposed to go. We're dealing with taxpayer money here. And it is incumbent upon us, as responsible administrators of the projects or the programs that we're working in, to make sure that the money is spent effectively, appropriately, and according to regulations. And that is important because, you know, there are a lot of very clever people out there who would like to get ahold of the OSCE's money.

You really have to keep track of where the money's going. And that is not easy work.

TIERSKY: Certainly, sounds like a management – a management challenge and a particular skillset.

Kavya, can I turn to you?

RAJAN: Yeah. Definitely the responsibility of being a program manager, of having the responsibility of funds. How impactful is the work we're doing and the funds that we're utilizing? That's kind of something that I'm constantly looking at. So we're doing – you know, I might look at portfolios in the human rights department. So I look at all of them, see where the greatest impact is, adjust accordingly.

You try to double down funds in areas of greater impact, and maybe consider getting out of areas of less. So it's really impact analysis constantly through the year, through each budget cycle. And really having a feedback loop to assess that information. And that feedback loop needs to be more than just anecdotal. So evidence-based, and so that's very important. And the more impactful we are, the more we – the further and faster we go with achieving – with furthering our mandate.

You know, I would say my job entails people management and project management. And they're both – their own beasts, you know? And there are people who are very easy to manage and those that are more challenging, and the same with projects. There are straightforward projects that have – that are ideated well and really well-structured and have the right personnel behind them. And then there are the ones where there are constant challenges, and you have to be troubleshooting constantly.

TIERSKY: Sure. Well, Kavya, I want to pick up on a word you've now used a few times, which is impact, which I think is a terrific word. And in a sense, I would like to ask you

both to reflect a little bit less formally and a little bit more anecdotally on – if I could put it this way – days that you felt really went well, times where you felt like the ball was moved forward on a given issue. Could you – could you share with our listeners what a good day looks like, that you can recall? Kelsey, would you start for us?

HARRIS-SMITH: It's not a particular day, but when I was working in Tajikistan, we had a network of what were called Women Support Centers. And they were, particularly in the rural areas, we would establish an office which would be staffed by some managers, some counselors, a psychologist and a lawyer, and some people to do skills training. And these were to assist women. It's tough being a woman in Tajikistan, in many ways. It's tough being a woman in the world, in many ways, but in some places more so than others. And these were to assist women with problems dealing in their society, or problems that they encountered in their society.

And so one of the things that they would do would be awareness of the problems or the possibility of trafficking in human persons. I was in a hair salon one time. And there was a young lady in there. And she was complaining bitterly. She was, like, I was just in Ukraine. And they are so – they are just terrible people there. At the border they were looking at my passport, and they asked me did I know the name, and they were asking me all these questions about my passport. And they asked me why I was coming to Ukraine, and what was I going to be doing there.

And she was really angry. And I was like, no, no, he had anti-trafficking training, because those are exactly the questions that that the border person should be asking after his anti-trafficking training. So it was really nice to see that, you know, an independent observation that, wow, you know, somebody was paying attention in their training. And employing it. That's a good thing.

On the other hand, a sad story – although with a happy ending, in a way – there was a person who came to one of our women's resource centers in Tajikistan. And she was running away from her family. In Tajikistan, when a woman goes – gets married, she goes and lives with her husband's family. And she had been married to a fellow who something happened. He left, he died, I don't remember anymore. But she was left there. And her husband's family said: Hey, we found a new husband for you. But he's already – you know, you're going to be a second wife. Which is an unfortunate thing that happens in some places, where the first wife is legally married and the second wife somebody says, bene, bene, you're married. So that's what happened to her.

And so she lived with this other fellow for some period of time. And then he sent her back to her family. And so then they were telling her that, hey, we found another husband for you down near Afghanistan. And so she came to the women's resource center and they were like, oh no, time out, this is not happening. And so they got the police involved and, you know, basically saved her. That was a very good thing.

TIERSKY: Wow.

HARRIS-SMITH: So those are the kinds of things where you feel like, wow, you know, this organization makes a difference.

RAJAN: Absolutely.

TIERSKY: Thanks for that. Yeah, Kavya.

RAJAN: That's a great story. I remember a day not too long ago, even before I joined the mission, our department in one of the sections – the community section – had been advocating for the creation of a Balkanology program.

We have issues with language, and translation. And so to kind of address the problem from the source we needed to work to create a pipeline of translators and interpreters. And that also meant we needed to create a faculty in the University of Pristina to teach Serbian and other languages – non-majority community languages.

And so we've been advocating for this for about four years. I remember a moment where I thought, you know, this could – this faculty could still be here in 100 years. And you know, we were a part of that. We advocated for it. We helped draw up the program for it, we liaised with the all the relevant ministries, we found the faculty to apply. You know, and if in a generation, or two, or three it's still around, that's good work.

TIERSKY: I love that story, because I think it gets to the ultimate idea that peace in a multiethnic society also involves the rights of minority groups, including linguistic rights. And having the OSCE participate, essentially, and help a society deliver those – whether it's – well, deliver those linguistic services and translations I think is very much a contribution to a stable and secure society, which is one of the things that we started by talking about.

HARRIS-SMITH: Making that kind of structural change in an institution is virtually impossible. So, I mean, my hat's off to you on that one. That's tough work.

RAJAN: It is. And I think we both gave examples of two different areas that are both very important. One is direct community work, work with communities and people. And the other is institutional change and institutional building. They're both important and they're both priorities of the OSCE.

TIERSKY: Let me – let me shift gears a little bit here and give you a chance to shoot down misconceptions or assumptions that people have. You know, you come back to the United States on a leave or you're in another country and someone hears maybe your job title or has some vague notion that you're off working for an international organization. What are some of the misconceptions about your work, about the OSCE, that people have that you find you have to kind of repeatedly correct? Kelsey, do you want to start with this one?

HARRIS-SMITH: Well, we're not the OECD. (Laughter.) We're not the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. That comes up all the time, because just the acronyms are similar, and you speak quickly. So that's one that comes up a lot. And then – but

then after that, there's no real latch points. So you really just have to sort of launch into the OSCE works on – in a comprehensive framework of security, et cetera, et cetera.

TIERSKY: Kavya?

RAJAN: I get a lot of, so, it's the U.N.? Is it the U.N.? Is it part of the U.N.? So then, you know, I usually say it's similar. It's a multilateral organization – then it's just describing it. That there are participating States, and we do work on the ground, and there's, you know, multiple duty stations and, you know, we just kind of fill the gaps of knowledge in whomever you're talking to.

TIERSKY: I suppose the next question they might ask you is, so, why does that matter to us? You know, wherever they're sitting in, let's say, the United States, someone who's not part of this particular world of the international organization of the OSCE or the U.N. Why does that matter to us? How do you answer that question?

RAJAN: Specific to Kosovo, Kosovo matters to the U.S. because we're following through on international commitments that made since 1999 to resolve the conflicts. Most people do remember, from watching CNN or, you know, just the news, they remember certain news anchors that covered the Balkan Wars.

We're following through on the commitments and that we still need to secure a self-sustaining peace in and around Kosovo. And the U.S. shouldn't leave this good work to be done just by other countries and our European allies, but it's very important that U.S. support is part of it.

So to draw the link between the wars – you know, the NATO intervention, our role in the Balkan Wars, as well as the post-conflict reconstruction work.

TIERSKY: Kelsey.

HARRIS-SMITH: The OSCE has a comprehensive approach to security which is aimed at making the states – all the states in the OSCE area, and the surrounding areas – into, you know, democratic, stable, safe places for people to live, and have families, and have jobs, and have businesses. And, you know, a lot of people in this day and age are really concerned about immigration – you know, uncontrolled immigration. It's not just a North American thing. It's a European thing. It's an Australian thing.

Everywhere where there are these stable, safe, prosperous countries, people want to move there. Because there are a lot of people who live in places that are not prosperous, that are not safe, where you build your business, and somebody comes along and takes it away from you. Or you can't get your kids an education, and even if they manage to get an education somehow there's no jobs for them afterwards. And, you know, when people are in that situation they can move. And they will move and come to places where – you know, where things are better, where they can get ahead.

And if people don't like or don't want the whole world moving to Australia, North America, and Western Europe then, you know, it behooves us to try to, help other places become more like – not more like ourselves, but more like stable, democratic, rule-of-law, so that you can have a decent life in your own home. Because people want to stay in their own cultures, with their own languages, et cetera, et cetera. But if they can't have a life there and if their kids can't have a life there, they're going to move. The OSCE is important, because we try to – we try to deal with some of these problems at their source.

TIERSKY: That's a terrific point, I think, to conclude on.

Well, Kelsey Harris-Smith, Kavya Rajan, I just want to thank you so much, to both of you, for joining us on Helsinki on the Hill. And I think as a last question – I imagine you're asked this pretty frequently – how do people follow in your footsteps and sign up to work for the OSCE and do good in the world, as you're doing?

Kelsey, why don't you start?

HARRIS-SMITH: Well, you know, as – we both have degrees in international relations. You don't have to have a degree in international relations. You can be a retired military person. You can be a former police officer. But you have to have experience in a field which is relevant to the OSCE's operational work. We get a lot of military and police. We get a lot of – a lot of international relations specialists, and some finance specialists and some IT specialists, and all that.

So you have to have a skill that the OSCE needs. So you got to kind of look at the jobs and say, how do I fit into that? And then there is the whole formal process. But languages are useful because although the working language of the OSCE is English, which is wonderful for us people that have English as a native language, but, you know, knowledge of other languages, because the jobs are all outside of the English-speaking environment, is extremely useful.

TIERSKY: Kavya, your perspective?

RAJAN: I would add, especially in the professional category, very important to have analytical skills, writing skills, and critical thinking skills. Developing these through various means – on the job, in – you know, at university, through practice, just over and over, it's really – the heart of a lot of the work that we do involves these three skillsets.

TIERSKY: Terrific advice for those seeking a career with the OSCE.

Well, again, I want to thank you both for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill and for the important work that you do. Listeners, you've come to the end of another episode of Helsinki on the Hill. As you know, we always love hearing your feedback. If you got to this podcast, you know where to find us. Thanks again. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.