

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

**“Albania’s Chairmanship of the OSCE: Responding to the Multiple
Challenges of 2020”**

Committee Members Present:

**Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Ranking Member;
Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS), Co-Chairman;
Representative Emanuel Cleaver, II (D-MO);
Representative Steve Cohen (D-TN)**

Committee Staff Present:

**Alex T. Johnson, Chief of Staff, Commission for Security and Cooperation in
Europe**

Witness:

Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama, OSCE Chair-in-Office, 2020

**The Hearing Was Held From 1:11 p.m. To 2:04 p.m. via Videoconference,
Senator Ben Cardin (D-MD), Ranking Member, Commission for Security and
Cooperation in Europe, presiding**

Date: Thursday, September 17, 2020

CARDIN: Chairman Hastings could not be with us today. I do acknowledge that Senator Wicker, the Senate chair of the Helsinki Commission, is on the line, as is Congressman Cleaver. We are so pleased today to continue the tradition of the Helsinki Commission to have the chair-in-office of the OSCE to a hearing of the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

So I want to welcome Prime Minister Rama for his willingness to participate in this hearing, and specifically to thank him for his willingness to take on the responsibilities of the chair-in-office of the OSCE. It's unusual to have a prime minister assume this position, but as we all know Prime Minister Rama is also the foreign minister of Albania, which is the traditional position for the chair-in-office. So on behalf of all of the members of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, we thank you very much, Mr. Prime Minister, for your leadership.

This is continuing a practice that we've had for many years, to have the chair in office before our commission. I think it speaks to the priority that is given to the United States to the OSCE in the Helsinki Commission to the work of the OSCE. We are bipartisan, Democrats and Republicans. And it's an executive or legislative commission which is very unique in our system of government. But it shows our unwavering support for the OSCE and its mission.

We recognize that these are extraordinarily difficult times. We recognize that. And you have many challenges that you need to confront. Since 1975, the Helsinki Final Act has given us a way to measure progress being made in our member states on the principles of democracy, and human rights, and inclusion. Challenges today are great, and we know that you are prepared to take that on. The commission – Helsinki Commission was created in 1976 to monitor and urge respect for the principles and implementation of the Helsinki Final Act. And it's been part of my entire congressional career in both the House and the Senate.

Whether Democrat or Republican, many of us have devoted considerable efforts over several decades to making the Helsinki process work for the people of all participating states. I make this point to emphasize that our outlook is one for the long term. The problems that we need to address right now in 2020 during the Albanian chairmanship are important. How we address them, however, will unquestionably impact how we respond to the challenges in 2021, and 2022, and beyond.

Therefore, governments today must exercise the political will to do things right. Compromise may be needed, but not at the expense of what is essential for the future. Mr. Prime Minister, as you work to resolve difference regarding the appointment of senior officers to the OSCE positions, to respond to the brutal human rights violations in Belarus, and to address the gross violations of the Helsinki principles by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, other neighbors, and its own people, you know, that this work must continue for as long as it takes. We must preserve and strengthen the values, institutions, and mechanisms that the OSCE offers.

I encourage you to remind the diplomatic representatives of the participating states in Vienna of this fact. As we know, the burden is ultimately not on the chair-in-office but on the participating states themselves to hold each other to account and to make needed progress. I can assure that we will work with our executive branch to ensure continued U.S. support,

engagement, and critical leadership. This will be bipartisan, and it will be executive legislative support.

As the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly special representative on anti-Semitism, racism, and intolerance, I've been working hard on that front. Far-right extremists and hate groups pose perhaps the greatest domestic threat to democracy within many participating states today. Their successes in recent years have divided us at a time when unity is needed to confront such challenges as Russian aggression and deteriorating human rights performances in too many OSCE countries. Mr. Prime Minister, I thank you for being willing to take on these challenges and know that you will have the support of the U.S. Helsinki Commission in carrying out this mission.

With that, let me turn this over first to Alex Johnson, who is the chief of staff for the Helsinki Commission, to comment on the modalities of this virtual hearing, since it's a little bit strange for many of us. But during this pandemic we've had to put up with many different things. And, Mr. Prime Minister, I'm going to have to apologize, the Senate has votes starting in 15 minutes, and there is another meeting that I'm required to be at. But I assure you my staff is on this call and you have my strong support for carrying out the mission of the OSCE.

Again, thank you. And let me turn it over to Alex Johnson.

JOHNSON: Thank you, sir. I will abbreviate these remarks for our modalities in the interests of votes that both the House and the Senate are conducting.

This virtual hearing is being conducted in compliance with House Resolution 965, which provides for the official remote proceedings during the COVID-19 pandemic. This hearing is being convened remotely to protect the health and ensure the safety of our witnesses, members, staff, and the public. Members and witnesses are asked to keep themselves muted while not engaging in the discussion, to limit background noise. Additionally, members and witnesses are responsible for unmuting themselves when they seek recognition from the chair. Member and witnesses must keep their cameras on at all times during the hearing. If you need to step away for any reason, please leave your camera on. Finally, the chair may declare a recess at any time to address technical difficulties or other proceedings of the House or Senate.

The hearing chair will now proceed with his opening statement and call on the witnesses. I yield back to the chair. Mr. Cleaver.

CLEAVER: I apologize for the delay. I'm still trying to function with the technology.

Thank you. I want to first of all welcome Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama. And I look forward to hearing your priorities for the remainder of 2020, during your chairmanship of the OSCE. I also commend your willingness to serve and Albania's contribution to the OSCE. So far in this turbulent year in the United States as well as around the globe, we're seeing protests on law and order, on freedom of speech, and for free and fair elections.

Especially as citizens and nations grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, the OSCE has an important role in defending and strengthening democracy and promoting peace. I look forward to this afternoon's discussion. Thank you. And also forgive me and for the entire House of Representatives for not cooperating completely with this hearing. So we will be going in and out. But thank you very much.

CARDIN: Senator Wicker.

WICKER: Thank you very, very much, Chairman Cleaver. And I send my best regards to Chairman Hastings in his absence today.

I want to associate myself with the remarks of Chairman Cleaver and also those very fine remarks of my colleague Senator Cardin, who's been a leader in the OSCE PA for decades. Thank you all for convening this hearing and for maintaining a strong level of activity at the Helsinki Commission this year, despite the evident challenges of the pandemic.

And Prime Minister Rama, thank you for joining us. It is an honor to participate in this virtual hearing with you, and to discuss the Albanian chairmanship and our efforts at large to address the many challenges confronting the OSCE as a – as an organization and as a region during this turbulent year.

Prime Minister Rama, you have been asked to do what no chair has ever been asked to do before – to guide the institution through a pandemic of unprecedented proportions in OSCE history, and to ensure that daily functions of the institutions continue, despite the leadership vacuum in four of the major executive offices. These are – this vacuum is of concern to members of the Helsinki Commission on both sides of the aisle. And so let me just assure that you we, as American legislators and as members of the Parliamentary Assembly, will continue to be part of a solution and developing a solution to this impasse, as we approach the Tirana ministerial.

I want to commend you, Mr. Prime Minister, as your prompt response on OSCE chair-in-office on the ongoing situation in Belarus. It's precisely in moments like this that we need the OSCE to hold governments accountable for flagrant human rights violations. I also appreciate that you've rejected attempts to weaken the OSCE response in Belarus, or anywhere else, with false statements of moral equivalency among participating states.

Let me also welcome you chairmanship and the cooperation with the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. I happen to serve as one of the Assembly's elected vice presidents, joined by Representative Hudson of North Carolina, in the Assembly's current leadership. And just as Senator Cardin previously served as vice president, and as Chairman Hastings actually served as president of the entire Parliamentary Assembly some years ago. At the Helsinki Commission, we have demonstrated our belief in engaging our friends and even our potential adversaries in work to support the parliamentary diplomacy. So I hope we hear today how diplomats and parliamentarians can continue partnering to achieve the aims of the Helsinki Final Act.

Let me close by expressing hope that we still might be able to see you, Mr. Prime Minister, in person in Albanian to represent the OSCE PA, and the United States at the Tirana Ministerial Council in December. You never know. If not, we certainly have an ambition to visit you in person sometime during the near future. So thank you. And I yield back to – and looking forward to hearing the testimony of our distinguished guest. Thank you.

JOHNSON: Mr. Prime Minister, the floor is yours, sir.

RAMA: Mr. Chair, members of the Helsinki Committee, excellencies, it is a great honor to be with you, although in distance. And if this was a normal year, this hearing would have taken place at the beginning of my term as chairperson-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Like my predecessors, I would have very much liked to have come to Washington to present the priorities of the chairmanship. But this didn't start as a normal year, and by no doubt is not continuing as a normal year. We are all facing a protracted public health emergency and its tragic consequences for vast numbers of people across the world. The impacts on our economies and the livelihoods of our citizens is unprecedented.

Despite the challenges, we can be proud. We can be proud of how the OSCE has navigated the restrictions and the very many complications from COVID-19. We have kept our discussion alive, both in the permanent council and through conferences and webinars. Our field operations have continued to carry out their important mandates. Here, I would like to pay tribute to all mission members serving across the OSCE region. I assure you that we take very seriously our duty of care for all our staff, in particular those posted in situations where the health infrastructure is less developed.

This has not only been the year of COVID, however. This year the OSCE is facing a perfect storm of unprecedented challenges, both external and also internal. My address today will be focused on how we can move forward our mandates of security and cooperation amid these very challenging times. But first, let me thank you, again, for inviting me to testify here at the Helsinki Commission – the only bipartisan, bicameral parliamentary body in our region specifically devoted to advancing the Helsinki process and the work of the OSCE.

In this 45th anniversary year of the Helsinki Final Act, we are particularly grateful for your Commission's dedication to the core values of our organization. From Helsinki and onwards, the OSCE has recognized the protection of human rights as a cornerstone for stable and secure societies. And the Charter of Paris, the 30th anniversary we are also marking this year, recognized that the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms is the first responsibility of a government.

In Moscow, less than a year after Paris, participating states agreed that human rights and pluralistic democracy are not to be considered exclusively an internal affair, but rather an issue of direct and legitimate concern for all 57 participating states. The OSCE, therefore, both of really our values, reflected in our shared commitments, and the community of responsibilities in which, peer-to-peer, dialogue and cooperation are the preferred tools for advancing our common security agenda.

We must never compromise on our values of full respect for democracy and human rights. Our shared commitments must be upheld by all participating states at all times and in all situations. And it is our responsibility to call the attention of our peers to violations and shortcomings anywhere in our region. It is this singularity of values and responsibility which frames also our response to the events in Belarus.

As the chairmanship, we have strongly voiced our concern at the disregard for OSCE values and fundamental human rights in the conduct of the 9th of August presidential election which, worryingly, could not be observed by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. The response of the authorities to the protests that followed has been unacceptable. The disproportionate use of force, the detention of thousands, including key opposition figures, the restrictions on media freedom, the limitation of access to information, and the detention, deportation, and de-accreditation of journalists are a mosaic of despicable acts.

But as I said, the OSCE is also a community of responsibility. As chairperson-in-office, my responsibility is both to see these principles upheld and to support Belarus in finding its way out of this critical situation. We encourage Belarus to take advantage of the tools that OSCE has at its disposal. In particular, the experience, expertise, and support that ODIHR has to offer in conducting human rights, rule of law, and election missions. The OSCE is an organization of peers, dedicated to security through cooperation. By definition, OSCE engagement is not external interference. It is a sincere offer of good offices.

And if we were serious about conflict prevent, our primary objective must be to establish dialogue between all sides. In this period, the Albanian chairmanship together with Sweden, the incoming chair, has offered to facilitate discussion with the parties to develop a common platform for dialogue. Comprehensive and inclusive dialogue needs to start as quickly as possible. When we talk about facilitating dialogue, we do not mean old-fashioned mediation, where an international referee flies in to propose solutions.

Facilitation means not having a predetermined agenda, not having a preconceived plan up your sleeve. It means helping the Belarusians find their own way forwards. Belarus has stated that it appreciates the OSCE, that it will continue working within the organization. For the government of Belarus, however, our offer is, quote, “premature.” It maintains that constitutional electoral reform, accompanied by national dialogue inclusive of the opposition, is what is needed, and has set itself a 2022 deadline for completion of this process.

While electoral and constitutional reform must form part of an agreed roadmap, the speed and direction of travel is for the Belarusians to decide together. And I underline, “together.” While OSCE values continue not to be respected while human rights continue to be violated and while past violations are swept under the carpet, genuine dialogue, of course, is too difficult to begin. In line with the values of Helsinki, the starting point for opening up a process must be the immediate and significant improvement in the human rights situation in Belarus – and not tomorrow. Now.

Specifically, the following three steps are necessary, in my humble point of view. An immediate end to violence and arbitrary on the part of authorities. Full respect for the right of

peaceful assembly. Prompt, thorough, and independent investigation of the conduct of law enforcement authorities. It goes without saying the OSCE stands ready to support legislative reform at the appropriate moment in the process and is willing to advise and support Belarus in addressing outstanding ODIHR and Venice Commission election recommendations. But this is not the most immediate priority, frankly. First there must be respect for human rights and dialogue.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you know, things are not well within OSCE itself. Let's face it. The participating states did not reach consensus for the reappointment of the four leading positions in the OSCE. The secretary-general, the director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the high commissioner of national minorities, and the representative of freedom of media. And this has focused media attention on a crisis on our organization. But we need to be clear that OSCE is not leaderless. By decision of the participating states, the political and organizational leadership is vested in the program council and the chairmanship.

The chairmanship has stepped in to ensure the executive structures have sustained leadership and management. And as we have seen week by week, these bodies have continued to carry out their respective decision making – sorry – decision making and executive functions, if not without challenges and difficulties. The OSCE will need its friends, like your Commission, to stand by us and, more importantly, stand up. Stand up for our values, and to support engagement to ensure new leadership can be identified without risking a long deadlock and a very deteriorating situation and appointed for the secretariat and our autonomous institutions.

The work of the OSCE human dimension has also been impacted, no doubt by this unprecedented pandemic. As you know, the OSCE annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting – Europe's largest annual human rights and democracy conference – will not take place this year. This is a huge loss for our organization. Together with Permanent Council, Human Dimension Implementation Meeting is a constituent part of the OSCE's mechanism for the review and assessment of the implementation of our commitments. With around 2,000 participants from across the whole OSCE region, it is also the primary forum for our citizens to take a direct part in the life of our organization.

And while the OSCE has successfully transitioned to online and mixed formats for the Permanent Council and other conferences, no other event in our calendar compares with the two-week Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in size, in length, and in visibility. It is as much a convention as a meeting, valued as much for the contacts in the margin as the core program. Unfortunately, I repeat, this year the challenge has proved insurmountable. And this great, defining event of the year will not happen.

As chairperson-in-office, we fully concur with the United States' position on the central importance of this hallmark OSCE meeting. We also welcome the interests of participating states in the possibility of using webinars to move forward discussion on the human dimension, commitments during this year without a Human Dimension Implementation Meeting. But the message that the Permanent Council, the chairmanship, and ODIHR has sent remains clear:

Force majeure does not create precedence. Human Dimension Implementation Meeting will be back.

Before concluding this testimony, let me say a few words about the priorities that have guided our chairmanship. Throughout this year we have stressed what we see as the three core qualities of the OSCE. First, our ability to respond flexibly to developments, to deploy quickly and make a difference on the ground. As we in Albania know from firsthand expertise, the OSCE can be proud of its achievements in preventing conflicts and deescalating tensions, observing elections, supporting reforms, and improving security and prosperity for our citizens. Throughout this extraordinary year, not even for one moment were we distracted from our focus on Ukraine. The efforts for the peaceful resolution of the conflicts, the most pressing security challenge in Europe today, remain a top priority for our chairmanship.

In spring, we achieved common agreement to increase the budget and renew and mandate of the special monitoring mission in Ukraine. The mission continues. It gives a unique contribution to peace and stability despite, of course, the challenges posed both by the conflict and by the pandemic. It is crucial the restrictions imposed on the special monitoring mission at the line of contact, citing the pandemic, were recently lifted, allowing it to replenish its staff in Donetsk and Luhansk. We remain committed to safe and secure access for the special monitoring mission throughout Ukraine, in line with its mandate.

The agreement reached at the Trilateral Contact Group on 22nd July on measures to strengthen the ceasefire has already led to significantly calmer security situation in Eastern Ukraine. We were encouraged that for days the special monitoring mission did not record any ceasefire violations and, importantly, for six weeks the special monitoring mission recorded no casualties, no damage to civilian infrastructure from shelling or gunfire. All the mines and other explosive devices continue to claim civilian lives, unfortunately. The brutal security situation and the protection of civilians should be at the forefront of all our efforts. And so it will be.

This is why full implementation of the common agreed conclusions of the Normandy 4 summit in Paris is essential. The Albanian chairmanship will continue to support the dedicated women and men of the SMM and the efforts of the trilateral contact group and the Normandy 4 formats. We say time and time again: We need to see full respect for OSCE principles and commitments, and full implementation of the Minsk agreements. Furthermore, in accordance with our priorities, we have maintained our conflict resolution engagement on Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, and the Transnistrian settlement process.

Second, the OSCE provides a unique forum for dialogue. That is what our organization should be about. Revitalizing dialogue and building trust has been a priority throughout this year. True, we need to call our violations of our commitments, but that cannot be all that we do. In the spirit of Helsinki, we should be dedicating at least as much of our energies to helping each other and pushing each other to fix the problems, not simply call out violations and just name the problems.

This year we have had a constructive dialogue on fighting corruption through discussions at the Economic Environmental Forum and our chairmanship high-level conference. This is

focused on the use of digital technologies, such as beneficial ownership platforms and investments screening mechanism to improve transparency and root out corruption. On terrorism, we have driven forward discussions on the importance of public-private partnerships, including the protection of critical infrastructure in public spaces – places. We have also put renewed focus on counterterrorist financing, where we need international cooperation, to follow the money, drain financial and logistical support to terrorism, disrupt the nexus between organized crime and terrorist groups.

Third, and final, the focus on full implementation of our shared commitments. The Helsinki recipe for peace in Europe is simple, yet effective: Respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, together with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. If we are serious about security and peace in Europe, we must take responsibility for fully implementing our commitments and supporting our fellow participant states in doing so. This year, the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, we intensify the promotion of human dignity and reaffirm our determination to fight hate speech by countering it wherever and whenever it occurs.

Standing together against anti-Semitism is part of Albania's history. During the hate of the Holocaust, no Jews – neither Albanian nor refugee – were handed over to the Nazis. And Albanian is the only country in Europe that had more Jews after the war than before the war, because ordinary people in towns and villages across Albanian put their common humanity before their own safety and that of their families. Conscious of this unique and precious heritage, Albanian opened its chairmanship with a conference on combatting anti-Semitism, the first chairmanship even of 2020.

Across the OSCE region, the dehumanizing rhetoric of the “other” is again being normalized in public discourse. Racism and intolerance are becoming more explicit. We need to stand up and to stand firm to all forms of racism, discrimination, and intolerance, to reaffirm the values of humanity and reject relativization. We therefore welcome the interests of some participating state in adopting a new decision on tolerance and nondiscrimination at this year's ministerial council.

In conclusion, I want to say a very few words about OSCE post-pandemic. We are now looking towards the ministerial council at the end of this year. We need to show the force of dialogue by coming together to reaffirm our values and to explore options for updating our commitments, addressing gaps, and bringing them into line with current realities. It will be a long process, by no doubt. The next phase will be an ambassadorial retreat, which we have convened in Vienna later this month.

We are confident that broad convergence can be found on some of the topics under discussion this year. But that depends on how open we are to dialogue and the will to put the longer-term common good for all our citizens above narrow short-term interests of individual governments. It's important to situation in Belarus, yet again. The international community has turned to the OSCE as the organization of choice for building bridges for dialogue. Our relevance has been strongly reaffirmed, and I'm very proud of it. This year we need to reaffirm

the spirit of Helsinki and Paris, and keep dialogue open among our participant states, even when the odds are against us.

It's through responsiveness, dialogue, and respect for our mutually agreed principles that the OSCE can make a real difference. Nothing less than the future of the OSCE is at stake. And again, by thank you very much for your patience, I want to express all my gratitude and respect to all the members of the Helsinki Committee, which, as I said before, is a unique organization within our larger organized system, that cares straightforwardly and directly about fundamental values that are the reason of the existence of the OSCE. Thank you very, very much.

JOHNSON: Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister. We are having a technical lapse due to votes happening concurrently, both in the House and the Senate.

Mr. Cohen, the floor is yours for any questions for the prime minister, sir.

COHEN: Thank you.

I appreciate your statements and your being with us, Mr. Prime Minister. This is a very unique time in the OSCE's experience, with these leaders not being approved and the political dynamics in mostly, I guess, in Turkey, and Hungary, and Poland, and Russia, Belarus, and even the United States, that make these the most troubling times for democracy and for the rule of law. I'm honored to be a member of the Helsinki Commission and to be working with you on the OSCE.

But it's a different time for us in the United States, in that we had a hearing earlier on the freedom of the press and how the press is treated around the world, and much of it centered on abuses of the press in the United States and ideas expressed by certain journalists. It once was that the United States was never a culprit and a violator of the sanctity and the safety of the press, and the opportunities of the press to operate. Now they're being called fake news, enemies of the people, and some have been arrested during protests.

So I just wonder, how do you view the United States these days concerning the rule of law, safety and protection and respect for the press, and the role of democracy and an opportunity for people to vote and participate?

RAMA: Thank you, sir, for your really easy question. (Laughs.) And let me tell you that in a different way your subject was posed by the Russian ambassador in the Permanent Council when we were discussing Belarus. And he, expressing, let's say, reservation about my initiative to be proactive in that and to make this offer from the OSCE to the Belarusian authorities for facilitation, said that he would welcome this if I would be as proactive in offering United States facilitation from the OSCE side, considering the situation there.

And my answer to him and to you in this case is that there is a big difference. The United States is mature enough and is strong enough in its own institutions to deal with whatever political debate and whatever political consequence of debate – of a debate that might be polarizing. So I think, with all due respect and from my very modest position, that United States

is – and it will always be – a point of reference for all of us, because what – no matter what debate, no matter what heated discussion, no matter what difficulty through a process of living together in peace and in a democratic environment, gets only stronger. So in that regard, I am not the right person to be asked about whatever weaknesses you are supposed to identify in your own democratic life. It's your job, sir, and good luck with it.

COHEN: Mr. Prime Minister, I certainly appreciate your thoughts. You're right. It's up to us to do something about that and it's a difficult position to put you in. But you are in an important position, and it's going to be a difficult position for the next year because the United States, we have our own issues. And I addressed a college here in Memphis earlier today. Today is our Constitution Day, where we recognize our Constitution, founded 233 years ago, that gave a spark to freedom around the world, in France and other places. And it was a revolutionary document.

As I told the young college students – and you may not know AOC, a young legislator of a very liberal persuasion, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, has been introducing ideas that are forward-thinking and beyond the norm in America – that the people who drafted our Constitution were the AOCs of their day. And they were, indeed. But we do have problems. You know, they're not equivalent to what we see, I think, in Hungary, and in Poland, and in Turkey. But I'm fearful of what will occur.

And we will be trying to take action, and hopefully we won't have disturbances beyond January of 2021. But in the interim, my colleagues on my political side will be doing all that we can to see that American stays resolute and firm of being a beacon on the rule of law and democracy. But I think you'll see things that happen here in the next 40-some-odd days, and in the subsequent, that might be shocking to you and shocking to us. But it's our job to straighten it out. So I was curious to hear what you said about the Russians contacting you and saying: Well, look into it.

Yesterday, our FBI director, in what is considered courageous, to differ from our president, which is something we never had in the past, which he would be courageous to distinguish himself from the president's comments. But everybody in the administration who's got integrity has been doing that. And he made it clear that Russia was particularly involved in trying to affect our elections once again. As Mr. Mueller told us, there was a systematic and sweeping effort to interfere in the 2016 elections on behalf of Trump and against Hillary Clinton. They're doing the same thing against Biden now. And yet, our attorney general says – equivocates, and says it's no different basically than Iran or China, while our FBI director tells us it is. We know from other reports that it is as well.

So it's a difficult position in America. We hope we'll get some support from the other side, and be together in respecting our Constitution, 233 years old. And we're proud of it. I'm proud of the OSCE.

Can you tell me what the reason was, and who it was that were not approving the four positions that were not filled? Fill me in on that.

RAMA: You said that you didn't want to put me in a difficult position. (Laughter.) But I don't feel in a difficult position to be invited from a question like that to enter in discussion. On the contrary, I feel in a comfortable position because at the end what maybe you need to understand, from my perspective, is that compared to many other countries that are in troubles nowadays, your troubles are luxurious, I might say, in the sense that they are the expression of a very vibrant and also, why not, heated debate about principles, about values, about the future.

But the fundamental difference with countries in trouble is that you are in the best place possible, where everyone can say what he or she thinks. No retaliation on sources of freedom of speech. And at the end institutions – the institutions that guarantee that when the debate ends and people have their say, it's the people that decide freely and in a fair manner. So but concluding with that part I would say that God forbid United States go in the direction of Belarus. But if so, I will not hesitate to intervene.

I would not like to comment on individual states here, because I think what we need now is to find consensus, is to listen carefully to everyone, is to evaluate as objectively and in as balanced a possible manner the candidates, and to give to the OSCE four people that will represent the spirit of the organization and will represent the balance that this organization needs.

COHEN: Thank you. I appreciate your position. And I will ask Mr. Johnson to send me a little brief, if he would, on the political issues. I was putting you in a spot, and my ignorance was on display.

But with that, I yield back the balance of my time. And I understand Mr. Cleaver, the distinguished gentleman from the other city that has some barbeque, is with us.

CLEAVER: (Laughs.) Thank you, Mr. Cohen. We want to make sure that the prime minister knows, as I said earlier, that with the COVID situation we are in a difficult situation. So we're running in and out. And I apologize again to you, sir, for this.

But I want to raise a question, you know, about authoritarianism in that – in the region. According to Freedom House's Freedom in the World Report 2019, it was the 14th consecutive year of the decline in global freedom, including a rise of authoritarian in the OSCE, which is extremely disturbing. And I'm not sure what all is involved in this rising decline – or rise in authoritarianism but, Prime Minister, can you give me your assessment? In this period riddled with crises and democratic backsliding, what specific value does the OSCE offer?

RAMA: Yes. Thank you for this question, which, as a matter of fact, would be a great line to open a very thorough debate about it. But in full respect of the format and of your time, I would say simply that I'm aware of that Freedom House report, and the latest index by the Bertelsmann Foundation also – I don't know if you are familiar with that – which do not paint a very rosy picture of the OSCE region, for sure.

Clearly, there is, as I said, an important discussion to be had. But I will refrain from commenting on political developments in individual participating states. Because I would like to say a few words about what OSCE can do, and has done, as a representative of a country that has

benefitted – Albania – from having a field operation on the ground and the support provided by – for years – by the OSCE, ODIHR, and other parts. I want to underline that this organization has definitely made – continues to make good to countries. And the same applies for the region in so-called old democracies, you know, where we see constitutions being changed and key legislation amended in line with expert advice from our executive structures.

Now, still I am aware that this is not an exhaustive answer to your question. But I strongly believe that we need to have a deep discussion about it. And it should be part of the OSCE engagement to engage within about trying to give not simply a theoretical answer to your question, but also to give something more than that – to give some hints about how we deal with this phenomena that is showing up but, in my view, is very much more complex than its expression in terms of authoritarianism. Because it has to do with a lot of fake news, with a lot of biased sources of communication and information and exchange. And, by no doubt, with a lot of social and economic kind of frustration.

CLEAVER: To close out, one final question. Do you think it's ideological? Do you think it's economic pressures that contributes to the authoritarianism? Is there any single thing that you think more than anything else is contributing to it?

I think we must have a problem with the sound, so.

RAMA: (inaudible)

CLEAVER: Thank you very much, sir, for being here with us. It's not often that we get someone of your stature, and so you enhance our value by being here today. We appreciate you very, very, very much.

And with that, the Commission meeting comes to an end. (Sounds gavel.)

[Whereupon, at 2:04 p.m., the hearing ended.]