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

Helsinki on the Hill Podcast

"Civilians in the Crossfire"

Guest:
Alexander Hug,
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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. I'm a senior policy advisor on the Helsinki Commission's staff.

Listeners, I am so excited for today's show. I have the great pleasure and honor of welcoming to our studio an absolutely exceptional individual who's a real difference maker, a soldier-diplomat, someone who has on many occasions and in different circumstances sought to make the greatest possible difference for the vulnerable in conflict situations. I'm talking here about Alexander Hug, who recently concluded more than four years of service as the principal deputy chief monitor of the OSCE's monitoring mission in Ukraine – the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, also known as the SMM.

Alexander, thank you so much for joining us today.

HUG: Thank you for having me.

TIERSKY: Alexander, before I ask you a few questions I'm going to ask you to bear with me for a moment as I share something else with our listeners to set the table for our discussion.

Listeners, our guest today departed his position in Ukraine not because of sheer exhaustion, but rather because he reached the maximum 10 years of service with the OSCE in the fall. On that occasion, the then-chairman of the Helsinki Commission, Senator Roger Wicker, included a tribute to Alexander's service in the Congressional Record. I'd like to share a few lines from that tribute with you now.

So on November the 28th, 2018 in the Congressional Record it reads as follows: I wish to recognize Alexander Hug, an exceptional international civil servant who has played a crucial role in ensuring that the world knows the truth about Russia's aggression against Ukraine. This Kremlin-directed war, now entering its fifth year, is responsible for more than 10,300 fatalities and over 24,000 injuries, including as many as 9,000 civilians. It has affected 4.4 million in eastern Ukraine and displaced some 1.8 million people.

Mr. Hug, a Swiss national, completed his tour of duty as principal deputy chief monitor of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine on October 31st.

This unarmed civilian mission provides clear, unbiased official reporting from the war zone on ceasefire violations and the human costs of the conflict. It does this despite continuous threats and deliberate attempts to undermine and sabotage its work. The mission's reporting is a crucial counterpoint to the barrage of Kremlin propaganda that seeks to obfuscate the true nature and scale of Russia's role as a direct participant and the aggressor in the war. Alexander Hug's leadership in this challenging position, which kept him away from his family far longer than anticipated, has been exemplary. As chairman of the United States Helsinki Commission I thank him for his contribution to this crucial mission, and for all those who have served to advance its

work. Their selfless dedication continues to make an inestimable contribution to the cause of peace and security in the world.

And, Alexander, I think that sets the table very well for our discussion today. Thank you, again, for joining us. Let me – let me first ask you, did you ever think you'd be in a position to receive a formal commendation from a United States senator in the Congressional Record of the United States?

HUG: Thank you once again for having me here today. And, no, indeed, I would not have expected that this would happen, but I'm very much honored. And the United States has supported this special monitoring mission since its inception in 2014, and throughout. And that support was vital both to keep up the morale of all the monitors, including my own, but also to make it possible that the mission continue to deliver the facts that were needed for participating states of the OSCE to make their decisions to end this unnecessary conflict.

TIERSKY: Thank you for that, Alexander. Certainly our commissioners are united in support of this crucial mission. Let's give our listeners a little bit of a sense of where you've come from. As I understand it, at one point you thought you might be practicing law in private practice in Switzerland. How do we get from a young person who's thinking through that career path to someone who is recognized as a major figure in conflict monitoring in Ukraine?

HUG: That is true. My father is a doctor. Becoming a doctor was not my first choice. (Laughter.) So I took the second, and that was study law. And I did that in Fribourg or Freiburg – it's a town in the center of Switzerland, bordering between the language groups of French and German languages – and studied law there. And then I joined, once I've done that, the mandatory military service in Switzerland. And for quite a while, I became an officer, a company commander, and then also joined the first real service of the Swiss Army abroad, which was in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the late/mid-'90s, to support the OSCE, in fact, to arrange its election work that it has done there after the Dayton agreements.

And that was also the first point I got into contact with the international organizations work, with the work abroad. And that also made me then interested in joining this type of work. And then got into contact with my foreign ministry, and then one thing got to the other, and I started to work for the OSCE shortly later in Kosovo, which was my first mission as a civilian.

And later, after my first mission with the OSCE in Kosovo, did a second master in law, in human rights and international criminal law, because I felt that is an area where I also needed more in-depth knowledge, that I did in a break which I used to study back in the U.K.. In Aberdeen, in fact.

TIERSKY: Fascinating. And there's one moment in your experience in Ukraine where I can imagine all of this really came to ahead. Of course, throughout the mission, but I'd like to – I'd like to begin our conversation about Ukraine with, if you could take us back to July of 2014, you had only been in country, as I understand it, for a few months. And, again, in July of that year, Malaysian Airlines flight 17 was shot down over eastern Ukraine. It's a tragic, tragic

incident, 298 passengers and crewmembers were killed on that day. And in the days after, the monitoring mission, of course, but you in particular as well were able to play a crucial role.

Can you take us back to that day? Maybe we can start with, how did you find out about this incident, and what was your first reaction?

HUG: Yeah. I remember that moment pretty well. I was in Kyiv at the time, in my office. And in that period there were a lot of incidents with aircraft, mainly military aircrafts, in the eastern part of Ukraine. Those armed formations that emerged in the eastern part of Ukraine started to take down Ukrainian military aircraft, helicopters, on a quite regular basis. And my colleagues came into my office and informed me that another aircraft came down over the conflict area. Then shortly later they came back and said: We now believe this is not a military aircraft. In fact, it is likely a civilian aircraft. And then, you know, around the same time the first news bits came in, breaking news that the civilian airliners of Malaysian Airline departed from Amsterdam had come down, and contact had been lost.

Much more wasn't known. And we had quickly to make a decision how we react to this and how we follow up on this. And the mandate of the mission is to establish facts of reported incident. But that, of course, was one reported incident. And in the evening of that first day, we quickly decided to put the team together, found a way of being transported down to the contact line early next morning, and within 24 hours the following day we were there, together with a patrol, that then were able to start – to report about the incident. But then later on – and this was an almost month-long, right, day-by-day activity also to facilitate access to those who recovered the dead and the debris of that incident.

TIERSKY: So within the first 24 hours, you have a team on the ground. Were there any other international officials present?

HUG: Not official, but a lot of media was there present before us already. So I remember when we arrived, there was a crowd of journalists – including international journalists – on site – on one of the sites, because there was a large area that was covered with debris and the bodies that were the result of this incident. And, of course, there were those armed men too, who at least on the first days blocked our access quite significantly. They were armed and were threatening myself and our colleagues in those first days. We did not give in and continued to talk to the leaders of those armed men and requested that we would be able to facilitate dialogue to give access, most importantly, in those first days, in a very urgent manner, to recover the bodies that were exposed to the heat in the summer of 2014. And it took a couple of days until this actually was possible then, yeah.

TIERSKY: Yeah. I mean, there's no manual for this kind of crisis decision-making. There's no obvious roadmap. It's a kind of indication of the independence that you were able to take to make decisions in the field, was it not?

HUG: Exactly, that was it. And it was the mandate given to us by 57 participating states of the OSCE, including Ukraine and the Russian Federation, that mandated us to facilitate dialogue, to improve the situation, and to report about facts of incidents or reported incidents. So

while over our heads the allegations and accusations started – finger-pointing started, we felt, with that strong mandate in our hands, we could help to mitigate the situation and, as I just mentioned before, in those first days to ensure that through our facilitation it would become possible to recover the dead, bring them into shelter, and bring them back to the Netherlands, which we then managed.

And you have to imagine, this plane came down in an area where nobody else had access to do that. It was a fighting area, fighting ground. And in those first days of the conflict, there was no contact line. It wasn't clear who controls which area. The fighting was in pockets. It moved very quickly. And you made an assessment one day, it would look completely different the other day. So it was necessary, I still believe to this day, that you had this entity of the Special Monitoring Mission that was not involved in finger-pointing and accusing one or the other side but was down there able to secure the recovery of the dead.

And that also had some respect for the dead, to some degree. It was not there to make the headlines. It was not there to use the dead to make political statements. But was there to ensure that all has been done, that a dialogue is being facilitated with those who can make a difference, so that they then felt secure enough that they would then recover the dead, because it wasn't our own task. We didn't pack up the dead in body bags and put them onto the train. This was done by those that had effective control in the area. But this was only possible through the facilitation of the dialogue that the mission then started to engage.

TIERSKY: As you said, on the ground, in practical terms, you were facing sometimes very, let's say, resistant armed men. You alluded to not giving in to the threats, or to the resistance. Can you give us a bit more of a sense of what that actually looked like?

HUG: First of all, it's important to know that because the mission is unarmed, and everybody knows they're unarmed, they don't pose a direct threat. So the situation is already much better because of the unarmed nature of the Special Monitoring Mission, because they know there is no way that the observers themselves will push back with an arm or with armed aggression. So what we would normally do is we would try to explain our mandate. We try to say that, yes, we understand that you are now here in effective control, but that we would note this fact and that this is a violation of our mandate, that we will report to the participating states.

And we also used these objective facts that we collected on the ground not only to report to the participating states, and to the public – because all our reports were public and still are public on our website, not just in English but also in Russian Ukrainian languages so everybody can understand the reality as those observers have seen it there. But we also used that information then to talk to the leadership, who of course also not necessarily wanted to be seen in a bad light.

And it led, in the end, to the recovery of the dead, to the recovery of the debris. And likely, this incident was also the starting point of showing one of the added values of this mission, which was to build a bridge between one side and the other side, which to this day doesn't talk directly. And the Special Monitoring Mission, with that mandate to talk to everyone in Ukraine including those in effective control in areas where the government has no control, I

think there in those days in July was the starting point to prove to the participating states and to Ukrainians that the mission has added value.

TIERSKY: Well, Alexander, that was actually my next question for you, was how that moment in the development of this conflict really colored the rest of your time and the continued work of the mission. Because, of course, as tragic as the MH17 shootdown was as a unitary incident, this conflict endures today and is causing civilian casualties even today. And there are daily ceasefire violations involving shelling and the laying of mines. If you could – if you could kind of summarize from your experience as a – one of the leaders of this monitoring mission what the human costs of this conflict has been, that is now in its fifth year.

HUG: It is indeed the civilians on both sides of the equation that continued – from day one when this first unrest, and then fighting, and then armed conflict started – suffer the most. And they continue to do it to this day. And unlike those that fight, that are in trenches in armed vehicles, and have the knowledge as to where fighting erupts, civilians are in their gardens, in the streets. They cross the frontlines without that knowledge, without the protection. Are exposed to the shelling. Are exposed to the mines, the unexploded ordnance, the environmental pollution that is starting to become also a problem that they are exposed to. And that risk is often underreported because it's hard to detect themselves.

And of course, they're also restricted in general as to what they're doing, mainly in areas beyond government control. And there, the movement of people – civilians – is severely restricted. But also if civilians want to cross into government-controlled areas, the contact line, if you wish, or the front line where government forces are opposed to non-government armed formations is roughly 500-kilometer long – an incredible long distance. And only at five locations along those 500 kilometers the civilians can cross that contact line. And that is very difficult, very cumbersome. But despite the fact that it is so difficult, so dangerous, up to 40,000 Ukrainians cross that contact line on a single day. And that is different to any other conflict I have seen, even the Balkans or in the Middle East. So normally the contact line is a – is a division line between ethnic groups or religious groups. That is not the case in the conflict in eastern Ukraine.

TIERSKY: So the obvious question emerges, why would civilians put themselves at such risk, at such dangerous crossing points? Why are they still moving across the line of contact?

HUG: First of all, there was no contact line before the conflict. It's an artificial drawn line in September 2014, when the conflict was in full swing. There is also no geography that would divide the people there. They have never been divided there. It was an integrated economic area of various mines, heavy industry, big transport routes, gas, water, electricity, pipelines zigzag across that front line, that contact line. And people, of course, have friends on the other side, they have schools on the other side, often they are working places on the other side, and of they also cross for very practical reasons – for instance to pick up their pensions on the other side.

TIERSKY: As I think you've mentioned, a lot of the people who are – who are undertaking these crossings are often quite elderly and frail. They're civilians who haven't had the wherewithal to leave these areas and find other economic opportunity where they can, or they've simply – they're quite attached to their homes and what belongings they might still have on one side or the other. It's very tragic. I understand civilians regularly are facing severe hardships as they try to make these crossings, and actually there have been a number of deaths.

HUG: That is true. People die out of exhaustion. People die when crossing because they walk into minefields when they lose their patience to stand on the asphalted roads and then try to cross through non-approved crossing roads, or roads that they used before, but they are not declared as safe, because they don't want to stand for hours in the queue. But allow me also to make another point, which is often underreported as well. There is 1.5 million internally displaced people that had to leave these areas because it was too dangerous, unbearable to live. And that is the official number. One and a half million Ukrainians had to leave the area in a conflict now that is lasting for far too long.

And all of those internally displaced persons – and I'm not counting those that have left Ukraine because of the conflict – they want to get home. They want to get back home. And because they can't at the moment, because it's too dangerous, or their workplace doesn't exist any longer, or they probably face repression or persecution, they have to build a new life elsewhere in Ukraine. They have to find new work. They are in a complete new society. Very difficult for these people. And also their fate, I think, should be paid attention to because also those – along with those that remained in the area – will build the future once the guns go silent.

TIERSKY: Alexander, clearly the humanitarian situation is tragic and not getting any better. There seems to be a misunderstanding on the part, perhaps, of some Ukrainians. Does the OSCE Monitoring Mission have a humanitarian role as part of its mandate?

HUG: In the broad sense, yes. And the broad sense is defined by providing information as to where humanitarian assistance, aid, might be needed. So in practical terms, our monitors see a destroyed water pipeline. They can exactly define where it is. They can take a picture of the damage. And then they provide this information to those who can repair that water pipeline. And then also what the mission can do through its dialogue facilitation mandate, which we discussed before, it can then facilitate access to the repair crew, to wit by, for instance, facilitating a localized ceasefire so that the repair can be done.

And the same methodology is applied to the delivery of food, to the recovery of the dead, to repair of other critical infrastructure. There's also gas pipelines, especially important now in the winter, that is needed to heat homes. It is also applied, for instance, for the exchange of hostages or prisoners across the contact line, where the mission doesn't actually do the actual transport of those detained persons, but facilitates, creates the environment within which these humanitarian activities can take place. It's not an easy task for the monitors on the ground, in particular because they see the suffering, they see people that are hungry. They see the need, but they can't do anything themselves. They have to report that through their normal reporting procedures, and then other organizations then can use that information and deliver the aid. But the mission itself is not a specific humanitarian aid delivery.

TIERSKY: Did your – did your monitoring teams – did they come across civilians who generally well understood this distinction or was it the case that civilians would see an OSCE team coming, with official vehicles and official, you know, helmets and such things, and simply see that they're not bringing – whether it's food, or the capability to repair infrastructure. Did civilians essentially understand this distinction or is this a kind of point of confusion that creates more tension on the ground, and potentially in a challenging situation for the monitors?

HUG: It's in general very difficult to explain what the mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission is in Ukraine. Of course, these monitors, again, in very – in a very practical example – they drive into a village near the conflict line. They have their notepads in their hands, or their electronic tools in their hands. They stay in an observation point. They talk to civilians. They take note of the fighting, of the needs, of the damages, of the requests of those civilians. Then they pack up and leave. There will be a reporting in the next day where all of that is visible.

There will be meetings taking place between the OSCE monitors, the international Red Cross, the family of the United Nations that is active there with NGOs to share that information to ensure that food or aid has been delivered. But when the food is delivered, it doesn't say OSCE on the package. It will have the name of another organization there. So it's very difficult for the monitors to explain what they're doing. It's also difficult to measure success of that mission, in particular what concerns the violence. Because the absence of violence can't be observed, because it isn't there. So all what is seen is the continuation of the fighting.

Of course, civilians also ask themselves: What is the added value of having these observers there if the fighting doesn't stop? And there, another very difficult area is to explain that the mission's mandate is not to stop – physically stop the fighting or enforce the ceasefire. It is to document whether those that have agreed to end the fighting – Russia and Ukraine – will actually do so. But to explain that to those that are exposed to the violence is very difficult if not impossible.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, as you said, the fighting hasn't stopped, and the fighting doesn't stop, sadly, with the exception of some short-lasted ceasefires. Let's talk a little bit more about parts of the monitoring mission's mandate that have to do with monitoring these ceasefires.

HUG: So a regular day of a monitor starts with a briefing, normally early in the morning before the sun gets up, where specific a patrolling group has been identified. And they move in armored vehicles with personal protection equipment to these areas, take an observation point, conduct monitoring activity, return back, write up their reports including what they have seen on the ground in terms of weaponry, in terms of the exchange of fire, in terms of the other observations they've made – civilian casualties, casualties on the fighting sides. Now, there are areas where the Special Monitoring Mission has no access because it is physically impossible – bridges are destroyed – or because it's too dangerous because it is infested with mines and unexploded ordnance, or because those on the ground don't permit access.

Now, to monitor these areas, the special monitoring mission has deployed technology. It uses cameras that are mounted up in these hotspots where the fighting takes place. The mission uses unmanned aerial vehicles that can fly day and night a quite sufficient distance to cover these areas, different types of uses. The mission also has access to satellite imagery. And the technology there complements the observation. And all that information we gather with the technology also ends up in the reporting that is being made available then afterwards in the public.

The mission operates with its monitors out during daytime only because the fighting sides don't permit, security-wise, activities in the night. But during nighttime, they statically observe the situation from their locations along the contact line. They don't move, but they have observation points in their accommodations. And then, of course, they use the technology during nighttime, mainly, to observe the situation on the ground. So it's a 24/7 operation that the OSCE runs at that contact line.

TIERSKY: If the mission has such extensive technical capabilities, some might ask: Why do you need so many monitors to be present in person? What's the added value of the human factor in the monitoring?

HUG: Well, first of all, it's an incredible long and vast area. It is very important also to understand that technology alone, not necessarily, is able to report the whole objective picture of a fight. Often a camera is directed to one specific direction. A UAV can't be in all locations.

And the mission is not only tasked to count the shots fired or the rounds that explode, but it's also there to interact with civilians, to get their views of how the situation develops, to make sure that they take note of their needs, to ensure that, as we discussed before, humanitarian aid can be brought to the right location in the fight format. And there the human factor, in the form of a monitor on the ground, is very, very important. It's also important to explain what the mission does. So every monitor, in that sense, is an ambassador for the mandate of the mission that is so difficult to explain.

TIERSKY: Sure. Sure. Well, we talked a little bit earlier about some of the resistance that you and your colleagues personally faced at the MH17 site. There is presumably continued resistance to monitoring, whether it's through technical means or through human means. Can you talk a little bit about the restrictions that monitors face in terms of their ability to go where they would like to go, and when they would like to go there, and some of the challenges that have been – that have been put towards your technical means?

HUG: There's in general two types of restrictions that the monitors face. There are passive restrictions and there are active restrictions. So the passive restrictions are mines on the ground that are there, which the monitors know where they are. There's physical barriers – blown up bridges, blocked roads, or otherwise difficulties of actually accessing certain areas. And then there are the active restrictions. That is, if you have man with guns pointing at the patrol, or just stopping them saying: Don't go any further. Or, you can't go into the village. Or you can't go closer to the border. Or, you have to move back.

Now, in terms of the distribution of these restrictions, those more active restrictions – so where you have active men with arms stopping our patrols – those to a vast majority take place in areas beyond government control. These are also the restrictions that are more intimidating, arguably more dangerous. They don't want to see the monitors recording the reality on the ground, because they know they next day it will be made public. And their violation of their leader's agreements would be opened up to the public, opened up to scrutiny. So preventing the monitors from monitoring is the key reason why these restrictions still happen.

TIERSKY: Sure. In plain language, it – to me, at least – it demonstrates there's something that somebody wants to hide. And, Alexander, when you talk about static restrictions, I would hate for our listeners to misunderstand that to mean something that's relatively less dangerous. Of course, we both know well that an American civilian, Joseph Stone, who was participating in the mission as a paramedic was killed by a landmine while out on patrol with the Special Monitoring Mission. So, by no means does static mean somehow less threatening.

So, again, you've talked about some of the restrictions on the reporting. You've talked about the means of collection. Can you abrogate for us maybe an annual number of ceasefire violations that you're seeing, kind of some of the top-line data that you've seen?

HUG: Yes. So on a daily basis the Special Monitoring Mission reports – and all of these reports are public, by the way, so your listeners are invited to check the website of the Special Monitoring Mission where all of that information is available – between a hundred and thousands of ceasefire violations that they record. So that then amounts to –

TIERSKY: Every day?

HUG: Every day, on a single day. And there was not a day – not a single day – without ceasefire violations, numbers being zero. So every day violations are being counted. So that that amounts then to yearly totals between 300 and 400-and-above thousand ceasefire violations that the mission continues to record. And this is only what he mission sees directly.

TIERSKY: I want to commend the Monitoring Mission's website to our listeners as well. You can see not only, you know, raw data and reports, you can also see extremely compelling videos. I'm thinking here of a video someone shining a laser pointer at a static camera that the SMM has deployed, in order to blind it from seeing something. These are obvious – again, who's trying to hide something?

Alexander, could you tell us a little bit about the national makeup, what countries are participating, in the Monitoring Mission?

HUG: So all 57 participating states are invited to support the mission either financially –

TIERSKY: Participating states of the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

HUG: Exactly. So either financially or with human resources. Now, I think roughly 40 to 45 of those 57 are represented in the Special Monitoring Mission. The biggest contingent is that of the United States. That has most of the monitors on the ground and other staff there. European Union member states, depending on the day you look at the composition, make up roughly 50 percent of the monitors there.

But also important is to recognize, even though Ukrainian citizens can't apply as monitors – that's the standard rule in all of the field operations of the OSCE elsewhere, that the host government citizens don't apply for these positions. But nonetheless, over 400 Ukrainians, of an overall total staff number of roughly 14,000 I think it is at the moment, are Ukrainian staff members. And without those Ukrainian colleagues, the international mission members would have a very hard time to operate. Not only because they would not be able to communicate, because they would need them as translators, but also because the Ukrainian staff are very well-placed to explain the very complex history, the society, the structure of the society that is so important to understand to be able then to put all what one sees in the right context.

TIERSKY: I've read controversy about a contingent of Russians who are participating in the mission. Is that a question you frequently got when you were still with the OSCE? And you know, did – were the Ukrainians concerned that there are Russians participating in the monitoring mission?

HUG: Yes. That question was often asked. And I understand the concern that in particular Ukrainian – the Ukrainian has, in particular vis-à-vis the participation of Russian monitors in the mission. However, their number – also publicly available – I think stands at the moment at 40 or just below 40 of an overall total of 800 monitors, roughly, or 14,000 mission members. So it is not that the Russian contingent would dominate the mission. Russia is a participating state, has an obligation to support this mission.

Any mission member that joins the mission also – and that's important also to understand – signs up to a code of conduct in the mission.

TIERSKY: Yeah. As I understand it, you also don't send out into the field, for instance, a monitoring team made up entirely of – whether it's the United States, or Germans, or Russians, or any other single nationality. Each team is multinational. Do I have that right?

HUG: That is correct. So these contingents don't operate as isolated contingents, as you would see in other operations, including by the United Nations for instance, where you have formed units from national contingents. Now, the numbers don't allow that even to happen. I think at the moment there is some 90 patrols out a day. So it is impossible to have even in each patrol an American or a Russia member. So even for the sheer numbers it is impossible. So what normally happens is there is a multinational team. And the leaders in the ground are responsible that they are multinational.

They come back in the evening or after their shift ended. They compile their reports. And all patrol members will have to agree of the report they submit. So it is also not the patrol leader, if it happens to be a Russian, or an American, or a Swiss, that the patrol him- or herself

can determine what that report contains. No, the entire patrol has to agree to that. So there are safety mechanisms there that ensures that there is some objectivity levels guaranteed in these reports.

TIERSKY: Checks and balances, as it were, against any types of problems in that respect.

HUG: If I may add, I mean, there were instances, of course, where the monitors got it wrong, because it's humans in the end that observe. And we have always been very clear and transparent that when there were wrong reports delivered by the mission that they have been corrected, publicly so.

TIERSKY: Alexander, you mentioned the United Nations. And I wanted to ask you, for those of our listeners who maybe aren't quite as familiar with the history of the development of this particular deployment, so of course the mission that we're talking about, that you were a leader of for four years, is a deployment of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It's known as the largest regional security operation in the world. Famously covers from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Why is the OSCE doing this, as opposed to, say, the United Nations?

HUG: It's important – very important question there. The Special Monitoring Mission got onto the ground on the 21st of March 2014. That is before the conflict has erupted. And it was meant to do observation work vis-à-vis the new government that came into place after what is referred to the Maidan movement, the Maidan violence in the winter '13-'14. Small-scale mission deployed to 10 cities across Ukraine, 10 monitors in each of the cities. That was the original plan. Very quickly then—

TIERSKY: This was the plan that you signed up for.

HUG: Exactly. (Laughs.) And very quickly then, however, in front of the eyes of these few monitors, unrest started to develop in the eastern part of Ukraine – the cities of Donetsk and Luhansk. The monitors started report that there were large scale demonstrations in front of administrative buildings. These demonstrators were originally unarmed. Then they had wooden sticks. They turned into metal sticks. Then those metal sticks became sidearms, became Kalashnikovs, became mortars, became multiple launch rocket system. And the OSCE there, the Special Monitoring Mission, found itself confronted with a full-fledged armed conflict. Not prepared for it, but it was on the ground. It had its structure on the ground. And then a decision was made to increase the number of monitors, to equip the mission properly. And it continued then to continue to implement its mandate that was agreed by the participating states.

The United Nations agencies – the different agencies of the United Nations – are present too. and the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission very closely cooperates with the missions of the United Nations. One example here is, for instance, the United Nations Human Rights monitoring mission that is also active on the ground, where the mission very closely cooperates with the activity of that specific United Nations family member.

TIERSKY: Alexander, I'd like to ask you about Crimea. Of course, while Russia claims Crimea is Russian territory, that's unequivocally rejected by the vast majority of the rest of the world as an illegal claim. Our commissioners have stated repeatedly that they will never recognize this illegal act, and that they will support sanctions on Russia over this occupation until it's reversed. What is the OSCE role in Crimea?

HUG: The Monitoring Mission came on the ground on the 21st of March 2014. Crimea was occupied on the 26th of February 2014. The mission came after that happened onto the ground. If you read the mission's mandate, which is Permanent Council Resolution 1117, also publicly available – it's a two-pager document, so those that would like to study it of your audience is invited to do so. It's quite interesting to read, because in the annexes of the mandate you will find interpretive statements by participating states. The Russian interpretation is, of course, that Crimea is Russian territory and therefore out of the area of operation. Where there are 56, roughly, other interpretation who would say that the area of operation is part of the mission's mandate. In order for the mission as an instrument of the Permanent Council to operate in Crimea, it would require consensus on that too. However –

TIERSKY: Unlikely.

HUG: – even today there is a monitoring team in a town called Kherson. It is a town nearby what is referred to as the administrative boundary line between mainland Ukraine and the Ukrainian Peninsula of Crimea. And they do report about what they see at those crossing points. And I recall there were tensions along that administrative boundary line. And the OSCE would then be able to shift quickly resources into these areas to make sure that if not presence, more observations, more objective facts can be reported back to participating states, who then should, in their weekly sessions that take place every first day in Vienna in the Permanent Council, debate these facts to find solutions out of this unnecessary conflict.

TIERSKY: Ultimately, the responsibility is, at least for the OSCE as a whole, is in that body, and with the governments that are represented there.

Alexander, let me – let me ask you maybe a last question. Of course, we've talked about the suffering of civilians that continues daily. The war, unfortunately, continues to unfold. It is by no means a kind of a frozen conflict, as it's sometimes termed in the media. Against the backdrop of a certain number of months of discussions that have reported as some sort of maybe a U.N. force to protect the Monitoring Mission is one proposal, there are proposals of a kind of international civilian presence that would allow for a transition towards a different – a different type of governance structure. And of course, in the midst of these discussions – whether they were progressing apace or not – we had this dramatic escalation in the Kerch Strait, linking the Azov Sea to the Black Sea, where Russian forces – the Russian Navy seized Ukrainian vessels and sailors. How do you see the next steps in terms of international engagement on Ukraine, to include the OSCE? What role might there be for the Monitoring Mission specifically relating to the Azov-Kerch Strait crisis, but of course not forgetting that there are daily – hundreds of ceasefire violations daily along the line of conflict. What are – what would you like to see happen next, and what do you see happening in the coming months?

HUG: I think the podcast that we are doing together here today, the interest that is currently back further to the front pages and not just confined to the back pages in the media in terms of trying to find a solution, is very important, because the conflict that has lasted now for five years is an artificial conflict. It is not driven by a group dynamic, be it ethnic or religious. It's purely politically driven. And that also would suggest that it has to be solved politically. And the resolution of this conflict is likely not to be found at that frontline, at that conflict line, or in Donbas, or even in the Kerch Strait, but in the cities – that is Moscow, but also Kyiv, and beyond – where decisions have to be made to make sure that such political will materializes that enables them to ensure that the suffering stops.

I do think that the debate about a possible peacekeeping operation is very helpful, not least because it demonstrates that there is a need for additional measures to be taken to end this violence. A peacekeeping operation and extended mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission, a separate activity of the OSCE in the Azov Sea, all of that is only possible and sustainable in its delivery if there is political will to enable these missions to operate. That is very important to recognize. They can be a very well-defined mandate of a U.N. operation, an enlarged OSCE operation, but if there is no political will it will not end. it is very important for civilians on the ground that continue to suffer, that those that bear responsibility – and, in fact, have agreed already by signing on the dotted line in these Minsk Agreements to end it, actually are doing so.

And the Special Monitoring Mission, throughout its five years, has in great detail documented where these violations take place. That should give those decision-makers the opportunity here to start working in generating this will to end this unnecessary conflict.

TIERSKY: Well, Alexander Hug, thank you for this compelling call to action, for this illuminating conversation, for your contributions in the field. I want to underline again, you are no longer with the OSCE, so you are speaking independently. We want to wish you continued success in your next steps. We'll be watching – we'll be watching your next career developments very closely. And thank you, again, for being with us today, Alexander Hug.

Listeners, thanks again for tuning into our show for this episode. I want to remind you that we would be thrilled to hear back from you with suggestions, feedback. Please use our website, www.CSCE.gov, our Facebook page, or you can find us on Twitter using the handle @HelsinkiComm, with two M's.

Thanks again for joining us for Helsinki on the Hill. Until the next conversation, I'm Alex Tiersky, signing off.

(END)