



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Report of the Head of the OSCE Mission in Serbia, Ambassador Peter Burkhard

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 27, 2014

The United States joins in welcoming Ambassador Burkhard back to the Permanent Council and we thank him for his comprehensive report. The OSCE plays an important role in Serbia, and we greatly value the work of Ambassador Burkhard and his staff.

The past twelve months have seen significant positive developments in Serbia. Serbia has taken major steps toward implementing the historic April 2013 agreement on normalizing relations with Kosovo, and we commend the commitment of the leaders and people of Serbia – as well as those of Kosovo – to that process. The European Council decision last year to open EU accession talks with Serbia is another significant indication of the progress being made. Relations among neighboring countries in the Balkans are improving, and Serbia has played a key role in that trend. That cooperative spirit has been mirrored by the OSCE Mission itself, and we wish to thank the Mission for the support it provided to the OSCE Mission in Kosovo during elections there over the past several months.

We congratulate the Serbian people on the parliamentary elections held on March 16. ODIHR's statement of preliminary findings and conclusions said the elections offered voters genuine choice and that fundamental freedoms were respected throughout the campaign. We note ODIHR's recognition of the transparent work of the Republic Electoral Commission, but note as well the preliminary conclusion that independence of journalists was "jeopardized by the influence exerted by political parties in power, including through discretionary public funding." We continue to encourage Serbia to address remaining recommendations from previous OSCE and Council of Europe elections assessments.

We applaud the Mission's continued involvement with human rights and the rights of members of minorities. The Mission's work in south and southwest Serbia has continued to play an important role in promoting positive dialogue and interaction among communities in those regions. The Mission's collaboration with the Ministry of Interior on improving relations with Roma communities addresses an important need in Serbia and the region as a whole. We note the progress made by the Ministry of Interior's Community Policing Department in promoting the human rights of LGBT persons, and strongly encourage Serbia to show its commitment to the freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association by creating an enabling environment to ensure a successful Pride March this year. We are confident the Ministry of Interior and the Serbian government are fully capable of taking the necessary precautions to protect the LGBT activists and their supporters and encourage them to do so.

Serbia has launched an ambitious campaign against corruption, and we appreciate the Mission's support for that. We once again reiterate the critical link that exists between corruption and lack of security. As the Mission builds on its experience helping Serbia fight corruption, we urge the OSCE to identify ways it can assist similar efforts in other participating States.

We look forward to the next Budva Process event and commend the Mission for continuing this effort to build dialogue between politically-involved women in Serbia and Kosovo. This sort of confidence-building measure needs more attention and should be replicated elsewhere in the OSCE region.

The Mission is on the right path, but we again call for more explicit recognition and incorporation of longer-term strategic planning in the Mission's operations. As Serbia's European integration progresses, the Mission's role should continue to recede, and the Mission must plan accordingly.

Lastly, we note Serbia's upcoming Chairmanship. We look forward to additional updates in the months to come on Serbia's plans for 2015, and we count on a smooth and seamless transition from this year to next year. The 2015 Chairmanship offers an extraordinary opportunity to showcase Serbia's progress and developing leadership role on the international stage. We commend Serbia for its recommendation at the February Human Dimension Committee meeting to have ODIHR consider the situation of persons with disabilities in their elections reporting and to have Serbia serve as the initial test case following its March elections. We look forward to following up on this and hope it is part of a broader commitment to protecting the human rights of marginalized persons.

With the opportunity presented by OSCE Chairmanship, however, comes great responsibility, including the responsibility to uphold and support all the human rights and fundamental freedoms and other commitments entailed in the OSCE. We call on Serbia to join the chorus of nations condemning Russia's illegal military intervention in Ukraine and attempt to annex Ukrainian territory. Now is not the time for Serbia to abstain from joining EU statements or from issuing its own statements on Russia's egregious violations of international law and its failure to uphold its OSCE commitments. We encourage Serbia to begin fulfilling a leadership role and setting a strong example of standing up for the principles of this Organization.

We again thank Ambassador Burkhard for his report, and pledge our support for the Mission and its work.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.