



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Astana, Ambassador Natalia Zarudna

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 21, 2015

The United States welcomes Ambassador Zarudna back to the Permanent Council, and thanks her for her report.

Ambassador Zarudna, with the adoption of a new mandate in December 2014, the former OSCE Center in Astana has transitioned to the current Program Office. We hope that the Program Office has been able to continue to work effectively with the Kazakhstani government. It is important that the Program Office respond flexibly to new challenges, and engage in meaningful activities that address the full range of OSCE commitments, including those that are sometimes deemed "sensitive" by the host government. These "sensitive" areas of work are fundamental to the prospects for long-term stability, security and prosperity of Kazakhstan and the region that we all want to support.

As the United States said in its interpretative statement when the new mandate was adopted, "[i]n order to be effective, an OSCE presence must be free to pursue openly and honestly its mandate to support the implementation of the full range of OSCE commitments." We also raised concern that the new process of project approval could slow down OSCE activities in Kazakhstan, and we recommended that a set period be established for timely project approval. Ambassador Zarudna, we hope you can comment on how this process is working thus far, particularly in light of what you just said about the OSCE serving as an innovator, as a vanguard in innovation, in terms of projects for larger organizations. And in order to be an effective innovator, we need to have the freedom to respond flexibly and quickly with new projects.

The United States supports the Office's work in assisting with parliamentary development, combating corruption, countering terrorist financing, promoting democratic policing, supporting penal reform and the national prevention mechanism against torture, supporting access to information and media development, combating human trafficking, addressing domestic violence, promoting gender equality, and strengthening civil society. We welcome the Office's increased focus on countering violent extremism and radicalization that leads to terrorism, while respecting and upholding human rights and the rule of law.

We hope that the Office may also strengthen its work in support of the freedoms of peaceful assembly and association. We were concerned to hear the criticism offered by United Nations Special Rapporteur Maina Kiai after his visit to Kazakhstan in January, including his observation that, in Kazakhstan, "maintaining stability is often misused to wrongfully curtail the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association."

Ambassador, the United States supports your Office's partnerships with domestic entities in Kazakhstan, including various government agencies, the Kazakh parliament, and civil society organizations. In this regard, we welcome the constructive dialogue between the government of Kazakhstan and civil society concerning draft legislation governing NGO funding. We understand that, based on comments from civil society, the latest draft would make voluntary the use of a new government clearing house for NGO funding. We hope that this positive change will be reflected in the final law, and that the government will ensure that any new procedures are implemented transparently and are not used to control NGO funding or activities.

Ambassador, we continue to believe that there is an opportunity for your office to develop a more formalized dialogue between various government agencies and Kazakh civil society. Last week, the Permanent Council discussed the work of the OSCE Office in Tajikistan, which brings together government offices and Tajik civil society organizations that are interested in the implementation of OSCE commitments. Together, they identify priorities, determine how to address those needs, and jointly implement agreed-upon projects. The OSCE Office serves as a facilitator and key partner. We urge you and the Government of Kazakhstan to study this model and consider how it may apply to future OSCE activities in Kazakhstan and how it may be tailored for that context.

Ambassador Zarudna, we thank you again for your work, and for the work of your staff, as you assist the Government of Kazakhstan in implementing its OSCE commitments. We thank you not only for your work over the last year, but over your entire tenure in Astana, and we appreciate the energy that you have dedicated to this task, and we hope this isn't the last time we see you in the Permanent Council, even though it is the last time in this current capacity.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.