



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Report by Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, Ambassador Peter Burkhard

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 18, 2016

The United States welcomes Ambassador Burkhard back to the Permanent Council for another comprehensive and detailed report.

Ambassador Burkhard, the OSCE Mission to Serbia continues to play a vital role in the country's development. As noted in your report, the Mission works closely with the Serbian government and its ministries, has developed strong links with civil society and professional associations, and provides support to independent institutions. These efforts continue to have a positive effect on the country's development, and reinforce the implementation of Serbia's OSCE commitments. Ambassador Burkhard, we share your positive assessment of Serbia's 2015 OSCE Chairmanship, thanks in no small part, we should add, to their strong Ambassador here, and agree that the country has clearly demonstrated its commitment to regional and international stability. The relationship between the Mission and the host government remains strong, as reflected in your close cooperation and mutually beneficial relationship. The United States views the OSCE Mission to Serbia as a model for how field missions and host countries can work together. We appreciate your efforts, and encourage you and the Serbian government to continue strengthening this partnership.

The United States applauds Serbia's commitment to the EU accession process and related reforms. The opening of the first two EU acquis chapters in December marks an important milestone in Serbia's Euro-Atlantic integration. Ambassador Burkhard, as mentioned in your report, Serbia's progress along its EU path provides an essential platform for further changes to the electoral system and could open the door to much-needed constitutional amendments to the justice system. The United States welcomes these changes and encourages Serbia to complete the difficult work on rule of law reforms, which will enable the opening of new EU acquis chapters. As Secretary Kerry said during his visit to Belgrade in December, the "United States is committed to working with Serbia as it implements rule of law and other reforms necessary to build a solid foundation for continued economic growth and greater prosperity."

The United States continues to support the Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo on the normalization of relations, facilitated by EU High Representative Mogherini. We appreciate Serbia's constructive role in this Dialogue, and welcome the latest meeting on January 27

between Prime Ministers Vučić and Mustafa. We call on all sides to sustain the momentum that has been created by fully implementing existing agreements and taking forward the talks on new areas for normalization. It is crucial that the prospect of early parliamentary elections in Serbia, which the United States of course hopes will be free, fair, and open to international observation, not be allowed to derail this process. Every step towards the full normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina strengthens peace and stability in the region and Europe.

In addition, we welcome Serbia's partnership with NATO and hope to continue practical engagement of mutual benefit between the Alliance and Serbia. The reforms necessary in Serbia's pursuit of EU membership will mutually reinforce and align with the goals Serbia laid out for itself in its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO—again, reforms in areas such as rule of law and counter-corruption.

Ambassador Burkhard, your report appropriately lauds Serbia's efforts to respond to the migration and refugee crisis. Serbia's response to the more than 800,000 migrants and refugees who transited the country in 2015 has been extraordinary. The United States commends Serbia for its humanitarian approach and dedication to meeting people's needs, demonstrating its commitment to upholding OSCE commitments and its international obligations. Serbia is treating migrants and refugees with compassion and dignity, while working to comprehensively address the humanitarian, legal, and administrative challenges presented by such a large number of people. We also commend the admirable work of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, which has coordinated efforts with the OSCE Mission in Skopje to assess the migrant processing and accommodation facilities on both sides of the Serbian-Macedonian border. This is exactly the type of cooperative activity we would like to see more of. The OSCE has the capacity to do more to address the migration and refugee crisis. We encourage the Secretary General and the Chairmanship to look to the work already being done by the Mission to Serbia as a key example to inform broader efforts in the OSCE.

The United States welcomes the Serbian Parliament's passage of an heirless property restitution law on February 12. The law, which mandates restitution for heirless property of Holocaust victims, is considered the final element of a comprehensive legal framework to address property seized from Holocaust victims. The United States looks forward to expeditious implementation of the law.

While Serbia is taking many positive steps, the United States is increasingly concerned about the shrinking space in which civil society and independent media are able to operate. Recent increases in negative media coverage of NGOs, reports of physical attacks against human rights activists and organizations, and the trumped up prosecution of a human rights activist for organizing a peaceful event last summer, under a law that the Serbian Constitutional Court had already ruled unconstitutional in April 2015, have threatened to stifle NGOs and civil society. On a positive note, we welcomed the news that a new Director of the government's Office for Cooperation with Civil Society was named last week, following nearly a year-long vacancy.

The statements and actions of government leaders are especially important in this regard, leaders must lead and avoid petty attacks. We urge the government to support the important work of human rights NGOs, independent journalists, and civil society more broadly. At a time when Serbia is focused on its goal of EU membership, it is important to emphasize that the path will require not just legal and structural reforms, but a fundamental change in the relationship between government and civil society. We look to the OSCE Mission to Serbia to help the government move in this direction.

In closing, Ambassador Burkhard, let me say once again that the United States appreciates the work you and your team are doing in Serbia, and the close cooperation you undertake with the government.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.