

Written evidence submitted by Alex T. Johnson (MUO0027)

I am deeply honored to contribute practitioner evidence for this parliamentary inquiry of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the House of Commons. I serve as the Chief of Staff of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), also known as the U.S. Helsinki Commission, and offer thoughts on behalf of Chairman Alcee L. Hastings and our Commissioners. Since 1976, the 18 Commissioners from the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, as well as our three Executive Branch Commissioners, with the support of our expert staff, have monitored compliance with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) commitments across the region and contributed to U.S. engagement in the Helsinki Process and its resulting organization.¹ This mandate has also entailed close cooperation with partners and allies to build reform efforts for OSCE institutions to increase their ability to support the implementation of commitments by participating States. As such, my evidence will focus on the inquiry questions in the context of the operational outlook for the OSCE.

- *Vulnerabilities within the governance and procedures of particular organizations the UK government is a member of, and the practical steps required to overcome these. What are the main obstacles to reform of multilateral organizations?*

This inquiry is particularly timely because the OSCE is once again in crisis as we recognize the 45th Anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, from which the organization's commitments are derived. **The OSCE is in dire need of concerted engagement from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and like-minded participating States.** Four key institutional leadership posts, including Secretary General, were denied extension on July 18, 2020² and held hostage for petty political parochialism.³ **A substantial OSCE vulnerability has been the diminishing diplomatic cost of such actions. That cost must be increased.** Participating States responsible for these actions must face consequences for politicizing essential management requirements, particularly in the midst of a global pandemic rife with security implications. Possible responses must include increasing transparency and the threshold for documentation by participating States who block consensus on key decisions.

¹ The Helsinki Process: A Four Decade Overview, CSCE Staff, 28 June 2019 <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/publications/helsinki-process-four-decade-overview>

² PRESS RELEASE: OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Edi Rama takes action to ensure operational continuity ahead of imminent vacancies of Secretary General and Heads of Institutions roles, 17 July 2020 <https://www.osce.org/chairmanship/457615>

³ "Executed Structures: Leadership Crisis in the OSCE," Walter Kemp, 14 July 2020, *Security and Human Rights Monitor* <https://www.shrmonitor.org/executed-structures-leadership-crisis-in-the-osce/>

The current leadership crisis in the OSCE is an extension of diminishing regional implementation of comprehensive security commitments, particularly within the OSCE's Human Dimension. Human Dimension commitments entail Ministerial Council Decisions since the Helsinki Final Act ranging from countering discrimination in all its forms to advancing media pluralism, as well as enforcing standards for the free and fair conduct of elections.⁴ The competitive advantage of the OSCE in this lane of activity is the empowerment of civil society participation through its cycle of activities.⁵ The key institution involved in addressing these commitments is the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) based in Warsaw, Poland. A distinguished and committed senior Icelandic politician and diplomat, Ingibjörg Sólrún Gísladóttir, served as head of ODIHR and was among the casualties of the recent leadership negotiation rift. She oversaw implementation of a cycle of events and activities which have increasingly been in crisis due to last minute approval of event modalities and agendas, further increasing the cost of execution. In September 2019, I helped lead the U.S. Delegation to the Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM).⁶ The HDIM is the largest human rights meeting in Europe with its two full weeks of programming as an essential commitment review mechanism. As such, participating States concerned about their deteriorating records in this area have sought to undermine this key event. Political considerations have even administratively decreased archival access to civil society and government contributions alike from almost two decades of HDIMs since 1993. This undermines the voices of human rights defenders who have sacrificed life and limb to confront increasingly autocratic regimes in the region through the statements that they have made at this conference.

The current crisis of leadership is the OSCE's greatest vulnerability and should be a priority for engagement of this committee. Blocked leadership extensions result from some participating States believing that they will not face consequences for holding negotiations hostage in a 57-nation organization based on consensus. The fact of the matter is, the political leadership today in some participating States would not sign on to existing commitments signed since the 1990 Charter for a New Europe⁷ following the fall of the Berlin Wall. **This increases the importance of UK and other like-minded nation efforts to improve the functionality of the OSCE to hold other nations accountable for norms in human rights and fundamental freedoms.**

- *The role of diplomacy in addressing organizations' vulnerabilities, with a focus on the performance and approach of the FCO in exerting influence over any reform processes.*

⁴ What is the Human Dimension? <https://www.osce.org/odihr/what-is-the-human-dimension>

⁵ In-Brief: Non-Governmental Participation in the OSCE, CSCE Staff, 19 December 2017
<https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/publications/non-governmental-participation-osce>

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/u-s-delegation-to-the-2019-osce-human-dimension-implementation-meeting/>

⁷ Charter of Paris for a New Europe, 21 November 1990 <https://www.osce.org/mc/39516>

Parliamentary diplomacy remains an essential process in complementing the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and addressing the persistent vulnerabilities in the OSCE. The U.S. Helsinki Commission's mandate also includes leadership of the U.S. Delegation of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA), through which our Members of Congress have closely cooperated with the UK Delegation to the OSCE PA, in particular, MP Gareth Johnson, Lord Peter Bowness, and Lord Alfred Dubs, among many others. Chairman Hastings, as a former president of the OSCE PA, also maintained close ties with the late MP Bruce George, who contributed substantially over the years to the reform of the OSCE. Thus, the role of the UK remains strong in this dimension and should continue to help address reforms.

The Parliamentary Assembly has acted as the conscience of the OSCE in its ability to offer recommendations and reflect the priorities of constituents throughout the region through declarations made by a simple majority, as opposed to consensus. Parliamentarians have introduced new thematic areas of activity and increased transparency of OSCE proceedings and negotiations.⁸ Further, the Helsinki Commission recently convened a hearing with leadership of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and OSCE PA.⁹

An example of parliamentary diplomacy in action was the recent statement of Chairman Hastings and other past presidents of the OSCE PA to highlight specific vulnerabilities to OSCE Human Dimension priorities in the absence of an ODIHR Director.¹⁰ Similarly, Lord Bowness joined other current OSCE PA Bureau Members in an open letter to foreign ministers of OSCE participating States about the consequences of high-level vacancies in the midst of a global pandemic.¹¹ Such efforts continue to constructively shape discourse in the OSCE and offer the political cover to take decisive action for reform.

- *The role of the FCO in coordinating UK engagement with multilateral organizations.*

From 2010 to 2014, I worked closely during my two tours in Vienna at the U.S. Mission to the OSCE with the British diplomatic teams in Vienna led then by Ambassador Ian C. Cliff and succeeded by Ambassador Dominic Schroeder. Your diplomats demonstrated tact, professionalism, and tremendous independent leadership at a time when your delegation was

⁸ In Brief: The Parliamentary Dimension of the Human Dimension, CSCE Staff, 22 September 2017 <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/publications/parliamentary-dimension-human-dimension>

⁹ CSCE HEARING: The Power and Purpose of Parliamentary Diplomacy, 20 February 2020 <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/power-and-purpose-parliamentary-diplomacy>

¹⁰ OSCE PA PRESS RELEASE: Call to save OSCE human dimension by current and former PA Presidents and human rights leaders, 11 July 2020, <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2020/call-to-save-osce-human-dimension-by-current-and-former-pa-presidents-and-human-rights-leaders>

¹¹ When Parliamentarians <https://www.oscepa.org/news-a-media/press-releases/2020/parliamentary-leaders-call-on-foreign-ministers-to-rectify-institutional-crisis-facing-osce>

seeking to harmonize with a common European Union foreign policy led by the newly formed European External Action Service. Your recent withdrawal from the European Union now represents an inflection point to reevaluate multilateral engagement, as evidenced by this inquiry. **From my perspective, the OSCE would benefit from an increased commitment from the UK through increased secondments of experts to field operations, extra-budgetary contributions for priority projects within the Human Dimension, and senior leadership nominees to ensure that the OSCE can remain the adaptable, diplomatic insurance policy that it has been for decades.**

Before Ukraine's 2013 Revolution of Dignity, many experts and diplomats were concerned that the OSCE had outlived its post-Cold War utility of facilitating democratic transition throughout the region. However, Ukraine's political transition coincided with the Ukrainian Chairmanship of the OSCE and its concluding Ministerial Council in Kyiv.¹² Proceedings of that meeting and its fraught negotiations saw increasing tension and organizational dysfunction, which Russia later seized for its invasion of the Donbas and illegal, purported annexation of Crimea in 2014. **The ability of the OSCE to rapidly deploy the Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine,¹³ and subsequent institutional responses, reinvigorated the organization by demonstrating that it could be a diplomatic insurance policy for regional stability.** As the Russia-fomented conflict has worn on at tremendous cost and loss of life, diplomatic fatigue has set in among participating States that this committee could seek to rectify in its exploration of invigorating engagement in the OSCE.

Looking forward, OSCE institutions and capabilities should be similarly seized for regional cooperation to address the security implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some participating States have disregarded OSCE commitments amid health system distress, societal unrest, and global racial justice reckoning protests. The Commission has even evaluated challenges in the United States in addressing human rights at home during this period.¹⁴ The emerging transatlantic dialogue on racial justice and other societal reconciliation has also presented an opportunity to consider new commitments within the OSCE, as well as a potential bilateral U.S.-UK agreement on combating racism and discrimination. **The UK should consider shepherding policies that develop OSCE institutional capacity to ensure implementation of commitments at home and throughout the region, particularly in the Human Dimension, during this volatile historical moment.**

¹² 20th OSCE Ministerial Council https://www.osce.org/event/mc_2013

¹³ Decision on Deployment of an OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine (OSCE PC Decision No. 1117) <https://www.osce.org/pc/116747>

¹⁴ CSCE HEARING: Human Rights at Home: Implications for U.S. Leadership, 2 July 2020 <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/human-rights-home-implications-us-leadership>

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