



## Uzbekistan: Economic and Democratic Development

**Stephan M. Minikes, U.S. Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe**

Statement to the OSCE Permanent Council

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(As delivered)

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to welcome also [Head of the OSCE Center in Tashkent] Ambassador Erozan. We are pleased to hear that the Center enjoys a productive working relationship with the Uzbek Government. We encourage both parties to continue to foster this partnership with a view to building a better society for Uzbek citizens by addressing obstacles to economic and democratic development.

In this regard, we too are pleased to note that a second independent human rights group was recently registered by the government, and we are also encouraged that the Government of [Uzbekistan](#) has been an active partner in the Center's work to promote small and medium sized enterprises (SME). As EBRD [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development] President Lemierre noted here recently, SME businesses is of paramount importance to overall economic development and social well-being.

I would like to note here that SMEs are the single largest job generator in the U.S. economy. They are truly the engine of growth.

I hope the Uzbek authorities will match their support for SME development with swift steps to make the legal and regulatory climate more conducive to business development and, in particular, to reverse recent decisions that have dampened economic activity. In this regard, I note the January closure of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border and the destruction of a river bridge near Korasuv which have prevented Uzbeks from day shopping in nearby Kyrgyzstan. In addition, we are concerned by the rash of forced shop closures in Tashkent and other cities for seemingly arbitrary reasons. These actions by the Uzbek Government seem inconsistent with its stated interest in promoting small business development.

We commend the Center for its initiative to establish a legal clinic for local journalists. This can be instrumental in ensuring a free and independent media and in protecting journalists from spurious accusations. Still, as we noted last month, we are concerned about continued reports of harassment, attempted intimidation, and imprisonment of journalists. Further cooperative activities between the Center and Uzbek authorities should be pursued to address these problems and to ensure that the lifting of prior censorship -- which we so welcomed -- produces an active and independent press.

There is no question that it is difficult to transform a society in a short period of time, and we are not insensitive to this. Still, if we hold to high standards, it is because we also hold high hopes and hope for high results in terms of a better life for the people of Uzbekistan. We want to see all OSCE participating States enjoy higher standards of living for their citizens. We believe this can be achieved by a firm commitment to democratic principles, supported by the rule of law and an independent judiciary; a legal and regulatory framework that encourages business development and outside investment; a free and independent media; respect for, and protection of, the human rights of all residents; and an active and vibrant civil society.

The OSCE Center in Tashkent is a valuable resource for the Government of Uzbekistan to use in achieving these goals. Particular activities that suggest themselves based on Ambassador Erozan's report would be:

-- Polishing Uzbekistan's well-drafted and comprehensive human rights legislation to bring it into conformity with international standards.

-- Working with Uzbek law enforcement agencies to ensure they fully understand and respect the law and the Uzbek constitution. Nothing is more detrimental to a country's efforts to reform its legal system than having law enforcement agencies act outside the law.

-- Similarly, given credible reports of convictions based on self-incriminating confessions obtained under duress, the Center should work with Uzbek authorities to improve the application of law and to ensure that international standards regarding the collection and the introduction of evidence are established and enforced.

Here again, an independent judiciary and a free and independent media are invaluable assets in providing checks and balances. The Government of Uzbekistan will not be well served if its efforts to implement reform are undermined from within.

We welcome Ambassador Erozan's offer to provide OSCE assistance to help the Government of Uzbekistan address the serious issue of systematic torture in Uzbekistan. We agree that the government's action on the Report of the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture will be an important indication of its intention to end this abusive practice. We stand ready to help the government and to provide the OSCE with the resources it needs.

Before closing, I want to signal my strong support for the Center's plan to begin multidimensional activities with youth. This is clearly the key to promoting a brighter future for the next generation. The best way to instill democratic values, respect for human rights, and appreciation for liberal economics is to make them part of one's culture. Teaching these values to our young people will ensure a brighter future of all of us.

Ambassador Erozan, thank you again for your thorough report and your active engagement. You and your dedicated staff in Tashkent are doing a terrific job. Let me restate my hope that the Government of Uzbekistan will capitalize on the presence of this active and talented team that you lead to help it continue on its path of reform. Thank you.

 [BACK TO TOP](#)

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