

Having a Voice in Global Debates

Just as more and more issues require a global response, political pressures in the United States are building against American participation in international bodies designed to address these concerns. R. Spencer Oliver, an American who is secretary general of one such organization, says U.S. representatives must be on hand to engage in the debate.

By R. Spencer Oliver

In a rare moment this summer, the seats of the United States delegation were empty when more than 220 parliamentarians from the world's largest regional security organization gathered in Belgrade for the opening of their annual meeting.

The 17-seat U.S. delegation has the most votes in the 55-nation Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly, a body of which Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin, D-Maryland, is an elected vice president.

Unfortunately, with the House in session and the Senate working several days the week of July 4th, only two voting Americans were present Cardin and Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-New Hampshire for part of this summer's meeting.

It was the poorest showing ever for the Americans in the Assembly's 20-year history down from a high of 13 U.S. members present in two of the last three years.

Regardless of the worthy reasons precluding member attendance, the low turnout weakens the U.S. argument for greater participation from Russia and other post-Soviet countries in the OSCE. Russia sent nine delegates to the meeting.

Political debate is like sport you can't win if you don't show up and the low turnout from the Americans cost Rep. Robert B. Aderholt, R-Alabama, his vice-chairmanship of the Assembly's human rights committee, a post from which he was an active contributor for the last two years.

Without Aderholt, Cardin is left as the sole American in the Assembly's elected leadership, and his vice-presidential term expires next year.

At a time when the U.S. Congress and the European Union have moved to sanction nations for their violations of human rights, forums like the OSCE become all the more important. Bringing parliamentarians and diplomats together for five days of meetings, debates and votes can create new streams for dialogue where others may have dried up.

In fact, nowhere other than the OSCE can members interact with their elected counterparts from Russia, Central Asia, the Balkans and Western Europe.

Take the case of Belarus, where opposition figures have been repeatedly imprisoned for exercising freedoms of assembly and expression. The country became a priority topic accounting for at least three hours of discussion in Belgrade, and for much of it a member of the Belarusian parliament was present never hiding from the criticism, but instead sitting and speaking right next to the German MP demanding prisoners be released.

The U.S. delegation is known to welcome meetings of its own, often with people whom they do not see eye to eye. Their jam-packed schedules keep members of Congress busy from the moment of landing, always squeezing the most out of these diplomatic opportunities.

Here a bilateral meeting with the Russian delegation, there a visit with a head of state in this case Serbia's Boris Tadic. The trips end up being as important for the lasting international relationships they forge as for the substantive ideas the members discuss when together.

Despite the small bench for the Americans this month, Cardin proved more than able to keep up the multi-tasking tradition at the Belgrade meeting. Juggling no less than four substantive issues in various committees, he made sure the delegation with no House members was still wholly invested in the multilateral process.

Cardin literally seemed to be everywhere successfully pushing an amendment on extractive industry transparency, speaking about investigating organ trafficking, and promoting a colleague's cyber security measure. He was equally active behind the scenes, where his lobbying contributed to the narrow defeat of a resolution that would have called for giving the Palestinian Authority partner status in the OSCE.

But as often as we saw Cardin speaking in Belgrade, fellow parliamentarians repeatedly were asking about his colleagues, especially Aderholt and Rep. Chris Smith, R-New Jersey, the Assembly's special representative on human trafficking.

Smith's Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Law, the world's first major anti-trafficking measure, took off internationally thanks largely to his work at an Annual Session where he gave his colleagues copies of the bill. They went home, translated it, and made it law beginning a global network that still works to combat modern-day slavery.

This type of robust activity is the hallmark of U.S. participation, but if it continues to fall to only one or two members to do all the heavy lifting, it

becomes harder to sustain and weakens the international forum at a time when legislators most need to benefit from each other's experiences.

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Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly.**
