



OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe,

Mr. Michael Link – Report on South East Europe

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Since my appointment in August 2021 as the Special Representative of the OSCE PA on South-Eastern Europe, I have been closely following the situation in the Region.

Hereafter are the most relevant developments in South-East Europe:

EU integration process

On 24 June, Bulgaria's parliament approved lifting of the country's veto on the opening of EU accession talks with North Macedonia. On 16 July 2022, the Assembly of North Macedonia also approved the revised French proposal, allowing accession negotiations to begin. The start of negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania was officially launched on 19 July 2022. Accession negotiations for North Macedonia and Albania started in Brussels in what was described as a "historic moment" for the two Western Balkans countries and for the European Union ". The Bulgarian government conditioned the opening of North Macedonia accession talks with the request to include the Bulgarian ethnic minority in the Constitution of North Macedonia. To adopt this, 2/3 of the votes in the Parliament are needed, or at least 80 out of 120 votes, therefore support from the opposition is necessary. The leadership meeting on this topic between PM Dimitar Kovacevski and the VMRO-DPMNE leader Hristijan Mickoski took place on 7 June, but without concrete results. German Bundestag adopted a motion on EU integration of North Macedonia in June. The Motion is made out of two parts;

I. Elaborates the history of the North Macedonia since it became candidate member for the EU and its challenges that the country is facing,

II. Calling on German Federal Government to assist North Macedonia on its reforms in order to fulfill all criteria required by EU, calling on countries in the region to assist North Macedonia in EU integration and calling on North Macedonia work in the field of judicial reform, administrative reform, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and the strengthening of the rule of law.

On August 1, 2017, the Neighbourhood Treaty was signed with Bulgaria, and on June 17, 2018, the Prespa Agreement was concluded with Greece to clarify the name issue. On March 27, 2020, the country joined the defence alliance NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization). Since then, the primary foreign policy goal of North Macedonia has been and remains accession to the EU.

Bosnia and Herzegovina received the status of the EU candidate country in December 2022 – the leaders of the European Union unanimously decided to grant EU candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina on 15 December. This decision answers the demand from the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina to live in dignity, peace and prosperity. It provides a drive for the country. From now on, political leaders of BiH have a clear task to advance with decisive and long-overdue reforms to turn this ambition into reality.

In December, the Council presidency and European Parliament representatives reached an agreement on the draft regulation on visa-free travel for holders of passports issued by Kosovo. In April 2023, the European Parliament has approved the visa liberalization for Kosovo, permitting its citizens to travel to EU countries without being obliged to apply for a visa at first. The decision will come into force as of 1 January 2024.

Elections and other events in Bosnia and Herzegovina

General elections were held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 2 October 2022. They decided the makeup of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency as well as national, entity, and cantonal governments. Some 100 observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly were deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the 2 October general elections. The OSCE PA observers worked closely with colleagues from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of NATO. On 6 October 2022, as OSCE PA's Special Representative on South East Europe, and Vice-President of the OSCE PA, I stated that authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina should follow through with reforms based on the preliminary findings and conclusions of the international election observation mission that concluded its work during the elections week. The OSCE PA participated in this joint endeavor with partners from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the European Parliament. I stressed the importance of elections being conducted in line with OSCE commitments and called on political actors to ensure that the opportunity for reform is taken to ensure that Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to pursue its European path. In particular, I pointed out that the post-election statement notes that universal and equal suffrage is still not guaranteed and that failed negotiations among political parties have left the electoral legal framework without needed reforms.

Bosnia and Herzegovina completed the formation of a state-level government on January 25, several months after the October 2022 general elections, with the approval of the new Council of Ministers led by Borjana Kristo.

The Law on state property has taken effect in Republika Srpska despite attempts by High Representative to BiH Christian Schmidt to block it. The Law on immovable state property used for the functions of public authorities came into effect on February 28, and it stipulates transfer of property from BiH to Republika Srpska ownership.

Despite harsh criticism from rights groups, international organizations and the media, the assembly of Republika Srpska, one of two entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 23 March adopted draft amendments to the criminal code, making defamation a crime.

International community's High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina Christian Schmidt passed a decision on 27 April, imposing a solution towards unblocking of the government formation in Bosnia's Federation entity, three weeks after he discussed the matter with local

politicians, he passed a decision in order to resolve the deadlock. With the new decision, the Federation of BiH got a new government after eight years on 28 April 2023.

In June, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska adopted changes in the law which imply that decisions by the high representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina would no longer be recognized.

Berlin Process Summit

On 3 November 2022, the leaders of the six Western Balkans region signed in Berlin the agreement on the mutual recognition of identity cards, which provides for free movement, recognition of university degrees and professional qualifications. The Summit of the Berlin Process was chaired by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

As the OSCE PA's Special Representative on South East Europe, I welcomed and commended Western Balkan leaders for the noteworthy achievements in the Summit. I said that the progress on free movement of people with mutual recognition of identity cards, university degrees and professional qualifications fulfills important preconditions for constructive and efficient regional co-operation while also advancing integration and consolidating regional stability. I was pleased to witness consistent and prevailing positive achievements stemming from the region recently also in the context of the OSCE. Constructive regional co-operation and a mutually reinforcing relationship between the region and the OSCE benefits the entire OSCE region. I am thankful for the contribution that Western Balkan region continue to lend to the OSCE and hope that this trend will continue to benefit, first and foremost, the people.

So far, four out of six signatories of the Agreement have ratified the agreement (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia), while the other two are preparing the ratifications.

The next summit of the Berlin Process of the six countries of the Western Balkans will be held on 16 October in Tirana, Albania as announced on 7 March by the German Chancellor Scholz after the meeting with the Prime Minister of Albania, Edi Rama, in Berlin.

EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana, 6 December 2022

That was the first-ever summit between the EU and the Western Balkans leaders to take place in the Western Balkans region. The summit was an opportunity to reconfirm the key importance of strategic partnership between the EU and the Western Balkans, a region with a clear EU perspective. The President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Council Charles Michel, the High Representative/Vice President Josep Borrell, the Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi, as well as Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States and Western Balkan partners attended the summit in Tirana.

Political situation in Montenegro

Montenegro's Government led by PM Dritan Abazovic failed to survive the no-confidence motion in the parliament in a vote in the early hours of 20 August, the Parliament announced. The motion was filed in early August by President Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – the largest party in the parliament, which had previously backed the government of Abazovic, leader of the United Reform Action (URA). However, the DPS withdrew its support after Abazovic signed an agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church in the

country, which aims to resolve a dispute that started back in 2019 when the then DPS-led government adopted a controversial church law.

Before the vote, Abazovic filed a proposal for a government reconstruction, but was rejected by the parliament. The government was overthrown in a 50 to one vote in the 81-seat parliament, however, Mr. Dritan Abazovic is the outgoing Prime Minister even after almost a year since no-confidence vote.

The presidential election in Montenegro was announced by parliament speaker Danijela Djurovic on 16 January and was held on 19 March 2023. On 16 March, just four days before the first round of the presidential election in Montenegro, the former President, Milo Djukanovic, called early parliamentary elections for 11 June. The second round of Montenegro's presidential elections, held on 2 April, was won by Jakov Milatovic, a co-founder of the Europe Now party. He won 60% of the vote, while his rival, former President Milo Djukanovic, received 40%.

The early parliamentary elections took place on 11 June, where 15 tickets of coalitions and political parties competed for the 81 seat parliament. Total number of voters in Montenegro for these elections was 542,154 and there were 1,159 polling stations.

The turnout in the 11 June parliamentary elections was 56,4%, which is lower than in the presidential election on 2 April that was 70%.

Belgrade-Pristina dialogue

The OSCE PA supports the EU-facilitated Dialogue that aims to achieve a comprehensive legally-binding normalisation agreement between Kosovo and Serbia addressing contested issues in order for both Parties to make progress on their European path and create new opportunities and improve the lives of their citizens. An agreement between the Parties is beneficial also to the security, stability and prosperity of the entire region. Recently, the European Union's envoy for the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, Miroslav Lajcak, has been reinforced by three EU countries' representatives: France – Emmanuel Bonne, Germany – Jens Plotner, and Italy – Francesco Talo, while for over a year Mr. Lajcak has been working together with US representative, Gabriel Escobar.

In September 2022, Mr. Lajcak presented a new plan for talks, the so-called German-French plan to both sides and since then they have been working in the framework of that plan. In the upcoming period there is an expectation to hold high-level meetings of the Belgrade and Pristina officials in Brussels.



On the margins of the Munich Security Conference 2023, I met with Mr. Lajcak to discuss the progress in the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, the German-French plan and other developments in the Western Balkan region.

After the agreement reached in Ohrid between Belgrade and Pristina, I made a public statement where commended very good news on 18 March. The high-level talks of the Brussels Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, that was built from the progress made on 27 February this year, where the sides agreed on the so-called German-French plan, which is supported by all EU Member States, took place in Ohrid, North Macedonia, where sides agreed on the annex for implementation of the German-French plan.

I said that “by agreeing to the German-French plan on 27 February and its annex on 18 March, President of Serbia and Prime Minister of Kosovo, Aleksandar Vucic and Albin Kurti, showed the maturity of their political leadership and we strongly support them on the implementation of the agreement that was reached under the tireless European Union facilitators. We are all aware that peace has no alternative.”

In the context of a meeting of the parliamentary Committee on European Union Affairs with EU Special Representative on the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue, Miroslav Lajcak in the aftermath of the Ohrid Agreement, I had the opportunity to discuss the latest developments in Kosovo and Serbia and the way forward following the agreement.

Tensions in north Kosovo

In August 2022, a deal on IDs was the first time that Kosovo leader Albin Kurti and Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić agreed on something after more than 13 months since they first met in Brussels. However, despite the calls by the EU and the US on PM Albin Kurti to once more postpone the decision on re-registration of the vehicles with the old Serbian number plates that was set for the period 1 September to 31 October, the Kosovo Government's decision on the replacement of Serbian license plates with the RKS code remained in force, and the implementation was supposed to start as of 1 November, but its full application would start on April 21, 2023. On 5 November 2022, members of Kosovo's ethnic Serb minority resigned from their posts in protest over the dismissal of a police officer who did not follow a government ruling on vehicle license plates. The ethnic Serb government minister, 10 MPs and officials in the police and judiciary all resigned in the four municipalities dominated by Serbs.

Following closely the situation in the north of Kosovo as the OSCE PA's SR on SEE I made a public call where I urged the leaders in Belgrade and Pristina to find a lasting solution regarding

license plates, expressed full support of EU efforts and that peace has no alternative, free movement of people in the region is fundamental.

On December 8, a police patrol was attacked in North Kosovo, injuring an officer, two hours after police troops were sent to the region in an attempt to replace hundreds of Serb officers who resigned the previous month over a car plate dispute. Two days later, a police officer who resigned in November along with other ethnic Serbian police officers from the Kosovo Police, was arrested when he tried to enter Serbia. Kosovo's law enforcement officers detained him on suspicion of terrorism. The arrests of the former police officer led to roadblocks. The former Kosovo police officer was released from custody after 18 days, which was demanded by protesters in order to remove the barricades. The Serbian protesters, at the suggestion from Belgrade, removed the barricades and unblocked all roads. While the barricades were erected and blocked all possible roads in northern Kosovo, the Kosovo Police blocked the border/boundary crossings. The north Kosovo roads were blocked by the barricades for 20 days.

Another two incidents took place in Kosovo in January: two young persons of Serbian nationality (11 and 21 year-old) were injured in a shooting in Strpce near Brezovica. Kosovo police arrested the perpetrator (33 year-old Albanian). Prime Minister Kurti condemned the attack on the two Serbs in Strpce; a special unit of the Kosovo police fired shots at a vehicle that failed to stop at a checkpoint near the northern city of Mitrovica on January 23, injuring one person of the Serbian ethnicity in the car.

Ethnic Serbs boycotted local elections held in 23 April in four municipalities in northern Kosovo with ethnic Serb majorities where local mayors resigned in November 2022 to protest a cross-border dispute over vehicle registrations. Despite the low turnout 3.5%, the results are considered legally valid, and there is no minimum turnout rule for the vote.

Since May 26, there have been tensions in the municipalities in the north of Kosovo after local Serbs started protests against the entry of the new mayors into the municipal facilities assisted by special Kosovo police. The US and EU were critical to Prime Minister Albin Kurti for not informing and coordinating the special police action and called on him to de-escalate, and asked him to let the newly elected mayors work from some other locations. On 29 May, 30 KFOR peacekeepers, some citizens, journalists and some policemen were injured by some violent protest. Since then, there are peaceful protests in front of municipal facilities. On 14 June, three Kosovo police officers were detained by Serbian forces, with officials from Kosovo and Serbia giving different locations of the arrest, accusing each other of crossing the border/boundary illegally. The three police officers who were arrested on 14 June were released by the Serbian authorities on 26 June.

As OSCE PA's Special Representative on South East Europe, I issued a press release. I said that "two months ago, I welcomed the progress that was achieved at the high-level meeting in Ohrid of the Belgrade-Pristina talks on good-neighbourly relations, but sadly, these days we could see unpleasant scenes in the streets of the north of Kosovo". I reminded that "the fundamental right to protest should be exercised peacefully and without using violence against law enforcement authorities, which in turn shouldn't use excessive force. The media has to be able to report in an unhindered way." I urged as well all actors involved in the recent events to work on de-escalation, stressing that there was enough violence. I called on both sides that "the agreed German-French plan and its annex agreed in Ohrid should get its final fine tune on the negotiation table facilitated by the EU".

The European Union has demanded three conditions from Kosovo Prime Minister, Albin Kurti: 1. immediate early elections in the north, 2. the assurance that Kosovo Serbs will participate in

them, and 3. the initiation of the establishment of the Association of Serb-majority municipalities.

Incidents in North Macedonia

In November 2022, two consecutive attacks happened on the “Tsar Boris” Bulgarian cultural club in the North Macedonian town of Ohrid that have put a strain on efforts to overcome sensitive disputes between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. North Macedonia’s President Stevo Pendarovski and other state officials condemned the attack. The secretary of the Bulgarian cultural club “Tsar Boris III” in Ohrid, Hristian Pendikov, was attacked and severely beaten in January 2023. The authorities in Skopje and Sofia duly reacted after the incidents in order not to allow the situation to jeopardize and to harm relations between Sofia and Skopje.

Leinsweiler Seminar

Since 2016, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the German Bundestag Delegation to the OSCE PA have been organizing an annual event that brings together members of parliament from OSCE participating States and experts to discuss issues related to conflict resolution. Named the “Leinsweiler Seminar” after its original location, these seminars are a platform for parliamentarians to recall historic conflict scenarios and discuss relevant questions of conflict prevention and rehabilitation, all aimed at promoting peace in the OSCE region.

Supported by the German Foreign Office and organized by the OSCE PA with the backing of the German Bundestag, the seminars take place in an informal setting, allowing for a free and open exchange between all participants, building on the so called ‘Vienna process’, which brought together parliamentarians from the Russian Federation and Ukraine in 2014.

Due to the pandemic, the last seminar took place in 2019, and we continued this year between 5 and 7 May. We held four sessions over two days, I moderated one of the sessions that was called “From here to where”, we discussed the best practices of the OSCE field work in South East Europe. The speakers of the session were: Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Kilian Wahl; Director for South-Eastern Europe, Turkey, OSCE and Council of Europe, Ambassador Susanne Schutz and Principal Advisor for the 2020 OSCE Albanian Chairmanship. Delegations from Serbia and Croatia attended the seminar and with Chatham House Rule we had a constructive and open discussion of all participants.

Tragedy/mass shooting in Serbia

On 3 May 2023, a school shooting occurred at Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in the center of Belgrade, Serbia. The shooter, identified as a 13-year-old male student, opened fire on students and staff, resulting in the deaths of ten individuals, including nine students and a security guard. Six others, five students and a teacher, also sustained injuries. Nine people were killed instantly, while one student died of injuries on 15 May.

Two days later, Serbia has been shocked by another massacre. A 21-year-old man shot dead 8 people and injured over 10 others. The incident took place in Mladenovac near Belgrade.

Since then, anti- violence and anti-government protests have been organized in Belgrade every week.