



OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe,

Mr. Michael Link –Report on South East Europe

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I wish North Macedonia success in their OSCE Chairmanship in 2023! North Macedonia is the third country from SEE after Albania and Serbia that is chairing the OSCE in the last decade.

Our President Margareta Cederfelt and Secretary General Roberto Montella visited Skopje in November last year before North Macedonia took over the Chairmanship of the OSCE from Poland, where they met with President Pendarovski, Speaker Xhaferi, Foreign Minister Osmani and our colleagues from the Delegation of North Macedonia to the OSCE PA.

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 the South-East Europe:

EU integration process

On 24 June, Bulgaria's parliament approved lifting of the country's veto on opening 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 European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen during a joint press statement with the leaders of the two countries told the media "the people of Albania and North Macedonia deserve it, and we will all stand to gain when one day we welcome Albania and North Macedonia as full-fledged members of our European Union".

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. The agreed text now needs to be approved by the Council and the European Parliament before going through the formal adoption procedure.

The new rules would allow Kosovo passport holders to travel to the EU without a visa for a period of 90 days in any 180-day period. This exemption from the visa requirement would apply from the start date for the operation of the European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS) and in any case no later than 1 January 2024.

Elections 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 endeavour 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.

Berlin Process Summit

On 3 November 2022, the leaders of the six Western Balkans countries 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.

On 3 November 2022, 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 fulfill 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 countries continue to lend to the OSCE and hope that this trend will continue to benefit, first and foremost, the people.

EU-Western Balkans summit in Tirana, 6 December 2022

That was the first-ever summit between EU and 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 Olivér Várhelyi, as well as Heads of State or Government of the EU Member States and Western Balkan partners attended the summit in Tirana.

Political instability in Montenegro

Montenegro's Government led by PM Dritan Abazović 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 Djukanović's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) – the largest party in the parliament, which had previously backed the government of Abazović, leader of the United Reform Action (URA). However, the DPS withdrew its support after Abazović 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, Abazović 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 Abazović is outgoing Prime Minister even after six months of no-confidence vote. On November 1, the parliament adopted a law by a narrow majority of 41 votes in the 81-seat parliament, also opening the way for electing a new government. Under the new law, the president is obliged to propose a prime minister-designate if the candidate has the support of 41 MPs in parliament. If there is not such a majority, the president has to organize a second round of consultations with political parties and propose another candidate. The law enables a majority of MPs to sign a petition and so propose a prime minister-designate if the president refuses to propose a candidate. According to the Constitution, the president has to organize consultations with parliamentary parties and propose a PM designate with the signed support of at least 41 MPs within 30 days.

The presidential election in Montenegro was announced by parliament speaker Danijela Djurović on 16 January and will be held on 19 March 2023.

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 Belgrad-Pristina dialogue, the German-French plan and other developments in the Western Balkan region.

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, Dejan Pantic, 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.

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.

Plans for the upcoming activities

In coordination with our colleagues from the Delegations to the OSCE PA from Western Balkans, I am planning to pay a visit to Belgrade, Pristina and Skopje. In Skopje, I am planning to organize an Inter-Parliamentary Forum with PA Delegations from the Western Balkans countries, should the delegations agree with my plan. The purpose of the visit is to get better informed by the people on the ground regarding the progress and the latest developments in the region. The Inter-Parliamentary Forum is meant to bring together the PA Delegations, where they could learn from each other and bring their respective countries closer to each other.

