



OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe,

Dr. Kyriakos Hadjiyianni – Report on South East Europe

September 2023 - February 2024

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MANDATE:

- Follow key political and other developments in the region, including with respect to political and electoral processes, institution building, regional cooperation and the evolution of the foreign policy priorities set by the countries in the region.
- Contribute to advancing regional dialogue, in particular at the parliamentary level, in order to advance regional cooperation processes, particularly in the Western Balkans.
- Support, as required and appropriate, the work of the OSCE Field Operations in the region.
- Contribute to raise awareness on the important work of the OSCE Field Operations.
- Advise the President on developments in the region which warrant the attention of the Assembly.
- Communicate with relevant actors within the OSCE as well as PA's Committees dealing with migration and terrorism.

My Activities

Since my appointment in September 2023 as the Special Representative of the OSCE PA on South-Eastern Europe, I have been closely following the situation in the Region. First of all, last October I went to Athens where I had a meeting with the Director of the South East Europe Sector of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mrs. Ioanna Euthymiadou, where I was informed about the latest developments in the Western Balkans. Also, on the sidelines of the 21st Autumn Meeting in Yerevan, I had the chance to meet the parliamentary delegations of Balkan countries, namely Albania, Bosnia-

Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Republic of North Macedonia, Greece and Croatia, during which we express the common desire to hold an inter-parliamentary forum, under the auspices of the OSCE PA, the aim of which will be the strengthening of the cooperation between the delegations of South-Eastern Europe. Last December, I participated in the OSCE PA Elections Observation Mission in Serbia, in which I found out the inadequacy of the political framework to carry out democratic elections. Last, but not least I visited Bosnia – Herzegovina last month to be informed about the latest developments in the country as well as the work and challenges faced by the OSCE Mission in the country.

1. Athens – South East Europe’s Sector of Hellenic Foreign Affairs

On 13 October I had the chance to meet with Mrs Ioanna Euthymiadou, Director of South East Sector of the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs in my capacity as Special Representative on South East Europe. This meeting has been an excellent opportunity to listen to the viewpoint of Athens and its experience on matters concerning South East Europe. With my interlocutor, I touched upon the latest developments in the Western Balkans, including prospects for European integration, upcoming elections, and regional co-operation. I noted EU accession was largely viewed as the most effective tool for sustainable regional stability and that the escalation of tension between Serbia and Kosovo poses a threat to regional stability. I also took the opportunity to underline the fact that three countries from South East Europe, namely North Macedonia, Albania and Serbia took over the Chairmanship of the OSCE in the last decade are significant examples of how the Westerns Balkans can contribute to successfully implementing the principles of the OSCE.

I was also informed about the various forms of multilateral cooperation which Greece promotes in the region of Western Balkan such as the Quadrilateral Greece-Bulgaria-Romania-Serbia, the Quadrilateral Greece-Albania-North Macedonia-Bulgaria, the Quadrilateral Greece-Bulgaria-Romania-Croatia, the Trilateral Greece-Bulgaria-Serbia and the Trilateral Greece-Bulgaria-Romania. These formats promote cooperation between participants in a number of sectors not only in foreign policy, security and civil protection, but also in transport, communications, interconnectivity of networks and infrastructure.

2. Elections in Serbia – December 2023

Serbia’s early parliamentary elections took place against the background of high polarization and intense competition between opposing political agendas. In the run-up to the election, a number of concerns were voiced about the intimidation and harassment of civil activists, human rights defenders, and journalists. While the elections were technically well-organized, they unfolded in the midst of a socially and politically divided landscape. The decisive involvement of the President dominated the electoral process, and the use of his name by one of the candidate lists, together with bias in the media, contributed to an uneven playing field.

It worth to be noting that Serbia has conducted its third parliamentary election in just under four years, a frequency that has diminished the public’s trust in the democratic process and the institutions governing it, and the election campaign has been marked by extreme divisiveness. Moreover, terminating parliamentary mandates ahead of time also prevents parliaments from working properly, preparing thorough and inclusive legislation and holding the executive to account, which is key in a parliamentary democracy. Before the elections they were raised concerns pertaining to free speech,

and the treatment of activists, LGBTI individuals, human rights defenders, and journalists, who have faced intimidation and harassment. In addition, a number of earlier recommendations to improve oversight mechanisms and introduce a campaign expenditure limit remain unaddressed, which reduces transparency and increases opportunities for high campaign spending, potentially further undermining the chances of the opposition.

3. Bosnia and Herzegovina – 31st – 2nd February 2023

On 31st January – 2nd of February 2024 I completed my visit to the Bosnia and Herzegovina, the first in my capacity as Special Representative on South East Europe.

In Sarajevo, I had the opportunity to meet with various stakeholders, including parliamentarians, government officials, representatives from the international community, and civil society organizations (CSOs). Namely I met with Ambassador Johann Sattler, the Head of the EU Delegation and EU Special Representative in BiH, the High Representative of the International Community for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mr. Christian Smith, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Edin Dilberovic, officials from the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees, the Collegium of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Delegation of BiH to the OSCE PA, representatives of the Presidency of BiH as well as local CSOs.

In the meetings, I discussed the latest domestic developments, as well as regional developments in the Western Balkans. I touched upon the importance of resuming full functionality of State Institutions as well as reforming the Law on Elections in accordance with the conclusions and recommendations contained in the report of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the OSCE (ODIHR) in view of the upcoming elections in October this year. More specifically on the upcoming elections, I reiterated that the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly is prepared to deploy an Election Observation Mission if invited by the authorities.

Other topics of discussion included regional co-operation, reconciliation and rehabilitation as well as the European integration process of the Western Balkans. The interlocutors described the ongoing efforts to advance the EU accession process and the expectations for the imminent decision of the European Council next March, on whether Bosnia and Herzegovina will be allowed to start accession negotiations. They acknowledged that the European Union integration process remains a main goal of BiH and the most effective incentive to advance the reform process.

During my contacts with the country's authorities, I emphasized that the progress made in the last two and a half decades should not stand still, but should continue to advance for the benefit of the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I urged all stakeholders to engage in meaningful dialogue to overcome the challenges. I also assured that in this context, OSCE PA is ready to provide all possible assistance in order to facilitate political processes on issues of strategic importance for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In underlining the unmatched presence of the OSCE in the region, most notably through its field operations, discussions also highlighted the excellent co-operation the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to enjoy with domestic institutions through the provision of expert advice and assistance.

In addition to that, I exchanged views on how to improve the current deteriorating state of the media sector, which includes: the re-criminalization of defamation in the Republica Srbska (RS), the physical attacks against journalists, the cyber-attacks against online portals, the adoption of the so-called foreign agents' law, the draft RS media law; the challenges around the adoption of the budget for the State-level public broadcaster.

Finally, I discussed topics of wider interest such as demining programs as well as programs related to missing persons in BiH. I expressed the opinion that the experience of Cyprus in these two areas could act as an opening to Bosnia and Herzegovina for bilateral cooperation. The Republic of Cyprus could provide expertise/training for the country's technical staff.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Bosnia and Herzegovina

- The Dayton Peace Agreement gave protection to the constitutive peoples, but also provided them with an opportunity to block the institutional work and that some political forces are abusing that.
- Conclusion by all interlocutors is that it is necessary for BiH to continue towards the EU accession. All the reforms that have been passed were agreed upon by everybody in the last 20 years, and should not be called into question.
- BiH has the obligation to fulfil 14 EU priorities in order to progress in the EU integration. Over 70% citizens of BiH support joining the EU.
- The main obstacle for functionality of institutions is the lack of trust and confidence between political representatives.
- Some local forces are still very dependent on external forces, and it affects their willingness to engage in internal dialogue.
- Commended positive role of the OSCE Mission in post-war BiH, in the area of education, human rights, rule of law.
- The brain-drain, electoral reform and weak Rule of Law some of the key challenges of the BiH society.
- There is a need for further regional cooperation, stressed that regional initiatives are good and especially necessary in the current situation.
- The Presidency of BiH is a three-member body, and the decisions are made by consensus. Lately, there is no consensus regarding the foreign policy of BiH.

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 Tirana. In Tirana, 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.