



**OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe,
Mr. Azay Guliyev – Annual Report on South East Europe
August 2021-July 2022**

**29th OSCE PA Annual Session
2-6 July 2022, Birmingham**

Azay Guliyev

Member of the Parliament of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Head of Delegation of Azerbaijan to the OSCE

Parliamentary Assembly

Vice-President of the OSCE PA

OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe

Chair of the informal Silk Road Group within the OSCE PA



Date of birth: 23 June 1971

Marital status: Married, 3 children

Electoral District: Binaghadi, Baku

Member of the Parliament since: 2005

Positions in the Parliament:

2005-Present Member of the Permanent Committee on State Building and Legislative Policy of the Parliament of Azerbaijan

2005-Present Head of Azerbaijan-Romania Inter-Parliamentary Working Group

2019-Present: Member of the Azerbaijan-Germany, Azerbaijan-Italy, Azerbaijan-Spain, Azerbaijan-Austria, Azerbaijan-Czech Republic, Azerbaijan-Estonia, Azerbaijan-Poland, Azerbaijan-Serbia, Azerbaijan-Switzerland, Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan-the United Kingdom Inter-Parliamentary Working Groups

OSCE PA:

2021-Present OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe

2021 Appointed as Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission to Albania for the parliamentary election

2020-Present Head of Delegation of Azerbaijan to the OSCE PA

2017 Appointed as Special Co-ordinator and Leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission to Kyrgyzstan for the presidential election

2017-Present Chair of the informal Silk Road Group within the OSCE PA

2016-Present Vice-President of the OSCE PA

2016 Appointed as Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Election Observation Mission to Montenegro for the parliamentary election

2016 Appointed as Head of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Election Observation Mission to North Macedonia for the parliamentary election

2013-2016 Vice-Chair of the General Committee on Political Affairs and Security of the OSCE PA (re-elected twice)

2005-2013 Participated in Election Observation Missions of the OSCE PA in many member countries including the United Kingdom, Russian Federation, Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, Georgia, Belarus

2005-Present Member of the Delegation of Azerbaijan to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly

Principal Sponsor of 4 OSCE PA Resolutions:

2013 OSCE PA Resolution on **“Strengthening Civil Society Institutions in the OSCE Region”**.

2014 OSCE PA Resolution on **“Protection of Cultural Property in the OSCE Area”**.

2015 OSCE PA Resolution on **“Adherence to the Helsinki Principles in Inter-State Relations across the OSCE Area”**.

2018 OSCE PA Resolution on **“Promoting Connectivity in the OSCE area through Development of Transport Links and Corridors, including by Revitalizing the Ancient Silk Road”**.

Member of:

2013-Present State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on cooperation with the European Union

2007-Present Joint Working Group on Human Rights Issues in Azerbaijan

2005-Present State Commission of the Republic of Azerbaijan on Prisoners of war, Hostages and Missing People

2001-Present Pardon Issues Commission under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan

1999-Present Supervisory Board of the Social Development Fund of the Internally Displaced Persons of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Other positions:

2021-Present Chair of the Advisory Council of Agency for State Support to NGOs

2008-2021 Chair of the Council on State Support to NGOs under the auspices of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan

Educational Background:

2007-2013 PhD in Political Science, theses title: “Place of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Social-Political system: National and International experience”, Faculty of International Relations,

Baku State University – Baku, Azerbaijan

2010 The short-term course on “Strategic Management for NGO leaders”, Harvard Kennedy School – USA

1995-1996 International Advanced Public Administration Executive Program, Public Administration Institute for Turkey and the Middle East – Ankara, Turkey

1992-1997 Faculty of History (*graduated with distinction*), Baku State University – Baku, Azerbaijan.

Languages:

Azerbaijani (native), English, Russian and Turkish

Mandate

- Promote dialogue in all segments of society, in particular at the parliamentary level, in order to encourage reconciliation and rehabilitation in South East Europe, and in particular in the Western Balkans, and to make a contribution to the transformation and building up of democratic institutions;
- Maintain close contact with and serve as a focal point for the Assembly's work in the region in general and its participation in activities of the Regional Cooperation Council in particular;
- Advise and report back to the President on the situation in the region, in particular the development of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and with respect to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue;
- Communicate with relevant actors within the OSCE as well as PA Committees dealing with migration and terrorism who work on issues related to the region.

My activities

Since my appointment in August 2021 as the Special Representative of the OSCE PA on the South East Europe, I have paid several visits to the designated region. As you are all aware the Pandemic's restrictions made the work and travel difficult for everyone and especially meetings in person. The first opportunity that was given to me when some restrictions were lifted, I visited Greece in November 2021. Prior to my visit to Greece, together with Vice-President Reinhold Lopatka we accompanied the President of the OSCE PA Margareta Cederfelt to visit Türkiye in November 2021.

8-11 November 2021, Türkiye

The OSCE PA delegation met in Ankara with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Speaker Mustafa Şentop, Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu, Justice Minister Abdülhamit Gül, Deputy Foreign Minister Yavuz Selim Kiran, and the Delegation of Türkiye to the OSCE PA led by Selami Altınok. Discussions with major political parties represented in the Grand National Assembly offered an opportunity to assess their role in Türkiye's new system of government and ensuring the rule of law.

We recognized Türkiye's long history of combating terrorism and extremist movements as a useful experience for other OSCE countries facing similar threats, and its challenging geographic environment, including its proximity to conflict zones in Middle East and to migration routes.

During our visit in Türkiye, I stressed that by providing safe access to healthcare, education, and meaningful employment to the largest refugee and asylum seekers community in the world, Türkiye plays a major role in preventing further instability in the wider OSCE region. Hence, open support to Türkiye and greater international co-operation and solidarity with Türkiye are therefore critical to promote greater responsibility-sharing between all OSCE participating States.

22-24 November 2021, Greece

In Greece, I had meetings with: Charalampos Athanasiou, Second Deputy Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament; Ambassador Themistoklis Demiris, Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Minister of Interior Makis Vouridis; Anastasios Chatzivasileiou, Secretary General of the Standing Committee on National Defense and Foreign Affairs of the Hellenic Parliament and Representative of the Prime Minister's Diplomatic Office; Dimitrios Konstantinos Kairidis, First Vice-Chairperson of the Special Committee on European Affairs of the Hellenic Parliament; Notis Mitarachi, Minister of Migration and Asylum; representatives of the opposition, including George Katrougalos, Representative of the President of the Syriza party Alexis Tsipras and former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Delegation of Greece to the OSCE PA led by Theodoros Karaoglou.

In the meetings, I touched upon the latest developments in the Western Balkans, including prospects for European integration, upcoming elections and regional co-operation. Discussions highlighted future regional prospects also in light of the successful resolution of the name dispute between Athens and Skopje. EU accession was largely viewed as the most effective tool for sustainable regional stability. I also emphasized the positive contribution of the Western Balkans to the OSCE, revised, among other concrete examples, the Albanian OSCE Chairpersonship in 2020 and the fact that North Macedonia is preparing to chair the OSCE in 2023.

8-10 March 2022, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The second visit I undertook to Bosnia and Herzegovina in March this year. I had meetings with; Šefik Džaferović, the Member Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and advisers of two other Members; Bisera Turković, the Minister of Foreign Affairs; Borjana Krišto, Denis Zvizdić, Nebojša Radmanović, Bakir Izetbegović, Dragan Čović and Nikola Špirić, representatives of the Joint Collegium of the Parliamentary Assembly of House of Representatives and of House of Peoples; representatives of political parties representing the Inter-Agency Working Group on Election Law Reform; Miloš Lučić, the Minister of Human Rights and Refugees, the Office of the High Representative, the Ambassador of the Republic of Poland to Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Delegation of Bosnia and Herzegovina to the OSCE PA led by Dragan Čović. In my meetings in Sarajevo, I was joined by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ambassador Kathleen Kavalec.

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 and the October general elections. 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. All interlocutors acknowledged that the European Union integration process remains a main goal of BiH and the most effective incentive to advance the reform process.

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.

11-13 March 2022, Türkiye

Together with and Secretary General Roberto Montella in the capacity of Vice-President of the OSCE PA, we represented the OSCE PA at the 2022 Antalya Diplomacy Forum in Antalya, Türkiye. I highlighted the role of parliamentarians and particularly the OSCE PA in mediating meaningful dialogue between the delegations of Russian Federation and Ukraine for stopping the war and addressing its humanitarian consequences. The high-level conference, hosted by the government of Türkiye and the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, brought together politicians, diplomats, academics, journalists and civil society representatives discussing and exchanging views on current international affairs.

My third visit was to three countries in South East Europe; North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro.

8-10 May 2022, North Macedonia

In North Macedonia I had meetings with; Stevo Pendarovski, President of North Macedonia; Bujar Osmani, Minister of Foreign Affairs of North Macedonia; Talat Xhaferi, Speaker of the Parliament of North Macedonia; Hristijan Mickoski, Head of VMRO-DPMNE; Zijadin Sela, Head of Alliance for the Albanians; Bilall Kasami, Head of Movement BESA and the Delegation of North Macedonia to the OSCE PA led by Igor Janushev.

I congratulated the interlocutors on North Macedonia's upcoming Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2023 and conveyed the full support of the OSCE PA. The meetings were an opportunity to listen to regional co-operation initiatives as well as bilateral relations with neighboring countries.

The interlocutors outlined ongoing efforts to advance the European Union accession process and expectations for the upcoming decision of the European Council on opening negotiations with North Macedonia. In my meetings in Skopje, I was joined by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Clemens Koja.

North Macedonia's interlocutors expressed warm appreciation for the work of the OSCE Mission to Skopje. Attention was brought to the war in Ukraine and effects on the country, specifically the economic situation and rising prices since the start of the conflict.

10-11 May 2022, Albania

In Albania, I had meetings with; Ilir Meta, President of Albania; Lindita Nikolla, Speaker of the Albanian Parliament; Arben Ahmetaj, Deputy Prime Minister of Albania, Elisa Spiropali, State Minister for Cooperation with Parliament; Enkelejd Alibeaj, Head of the Parliamentary Group of PD part and the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA led by Damian Gjijnuri.

With the interlocutors in Albania I discussed Tirana's domestic reform agenda, commending the steady progress marked particularly in the judiciary and in the fight against corruption and organized crime, as well as on the economy. The interlocutors stressed Albania's commitment to also follow up on past electoral-related recommendations by the OSCE/ODIHR through inclusive cross-party participation.

The meetings were an opportunity for me to praise Albania's contribution in multilateral organizations, also demonstrated by the OSCE Chairmanship in 2020 and the participation as non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council for 2022-2023. I commended Albania for

spearheading the Women, Peace and Security agenda in multilateral formats and for promoting gender mainstreaming in all levels of the domestic institutions.

The interlocutors highlighted that regional co-operation is improving, also thanks to the “Open Balkan” initiative and stressed that such progress can be a benefit for the accession into the EU of the region. I welcomed the new Delegation of Albania to the OSCE PA led by Damian Gjijnuri and encouraged to continue engaging in meaningful cross-party dialogue. In my meetings in Tirana, I was joined by the Head of the OSCE Presence, Ambassador Vincenzo Del Monaco.

11-13 May 2022, Montenegro

In Montenegro, I had meetings with; Dritan Abazovic, Prime Minister of Montenegro; Danijela Đurović, Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament; Ranko Krivokapić, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Aleksa Bečić, Head of Democrats and the Delegation of Montenegro to the OSCE PA led by Slaven Radunovic.

The Montenegrin interlocutors outlined Montenegro’s EU integration priority and its future steps. I praised Montenegro for its efforts and progress in the rule of law and the fight against organized crime. The meetings were also an opportunity to encourage all interlocutors to invest in further dialogue in order to achieve further results.

In the meetings in Podgorica the importance of the OSCE as a strategic partner in strengthening peace was highlighted, democracy and security in the region, including in implementing reforms and further strengthening democratic development as well as improving Montenegro’s electoral system and strengthening parliamentary capacity.

I highlighted the importance of ensuring full functionality of State Institutions, which, together with the reforms on the path to Montenegro’s EU integration process are considered as a priority by the Montenegrin interlocutors. In my meetings in Podgorica, I was joined by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Montenegro, Ambassador Dominique Waag.

6-8 June 2022, Romania

In Romania, I had meetings with; Robert-Marius Cazanciuc, Vice-President of the Senate; Vasile-Daniel Suci, Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies; Amb. Luminița Teodora Odobescu, Presidential Adviser for European Affairs; Iulian Fota, Secretary of State for Strategic Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Aneta Matei, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Interior; Dan Dragoș Drăgan, Secretary of State of the Ministry of Energy; Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Senate, including Vice-President Roberta-Alma Anastase; and the Delegation of Romania to the OSCE PA led by Radu-Mihai Mihail.

In the meetings, the interlocutors in Bucharest elaborated the relations of Romania with Western Balkan countries and shared thoughts on their European Union prospects. All interlocutors welcomed the European Union perspective of the Western Balkan countries, largely viewed as the most effective tool for sustainable regional stability and as a mean to advance the reform process.

The meetings in Bucharest were also an opportunity to touch upon the latest developments pertaining to Romania’s accession into the Schengen Zone and Romania’s EU recovery and resilience plan.

8-9 June 2022, Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, I had meetings with: Irena Dimitrova, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs; Danail Nikolov, Deputy Minister of Energy; Mukaddes Nalbant, Deputy Speaker on the National Assembly and the Delegation of Bulgaria to the OSCE PA led by Iskren Mitev.

The meetings in Sofia were an opportunity to discuss Bulgaria's relations with Western Balkan countries and their European Union prospects. I heard considerations pertaining to Bulgaria's relations with its neighbor North Macedonia and on developments related to its EU perspective.

Discussions touched upon the domestic political developments following the parliamentary elections and the presidential election in 2021. We further discussed recent domestic political developments, also pertaining to elections in the country.

The interlocutors elaborated on the state of affairs in the EU, discussions further touched upon Bulgaria's steps on providing its energy security from different sources, EU recovery and resilience plan.

Since I was appointed as OSCE PA' SR, in seven months I visited seven countries of South East Europe, unfortunately I couldn't visit Serbia and Croatia. As you know, parliamentary and presidential elections were held in Serbia in April. Due to some repeated elections in some polling stations, the election process is not yet over, and a new government is not yet in place. However, as soon as a new government is elected, I am planning to pay a visit to Serbia if I am re-appointed. Later on I will assess the possibility to visit Pristina.

In my visits to Western Balkans, I had the opportunity to meet in person four out of six OSCE Heads of Missions. Although I attended the Regional OSCE Heads of Missions Meetings in November 2021 and in June this year, in those occasions I had the opportunity and a pleasure to meet online all OSCE Heads of Missions.

After my visits to the South East Europe, I became more familiar with the region and with the political leaders of the region, hence in April I sent letters to the members of Collegium of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina to encourage them to come to an agreement regarding the Law on Elections. Unfortunately, a deal was not reached and the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina are called by Central Election Commission and will be held in accordance with the old Law on Elections on the October 2 this year.

Findings from my visits

Greece

In my meetings in Greece it was conclusion of all interlocutors that the EU accession of the Western Balkan countries is the most effective tool for sustainable regional stability. Greece is ready to support its neighbors in the EU integration process. The example of the successful resolution of the name dispute between Athens and Skopje is a model how disputes can be solved through a meaningful dialogue and both countries should be praised.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Greece

- The 2009 Corfu Process, an initiative to help the OSCE regain the key position it was believed to have lost - namely, its role as a forum for broad and inclusive dialogue on security issues from Vancouver to Vladivostok and the 2009 Greek OSCE Chairpersonship.
- Lesbos is a suffering island since the migrant flows exploded.
- The difficult situation in the Western Balkans: it is lost the momentum and enthusiasm of the past years, with countries blocking European Integration because of bilateral issues.
- Underlined the lost the young generation in the Western Balkans.
- The PA can play a pivotal role with regards to rule of law and good governance.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In my visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, I had the chance to meet almost all heads of institutions, and that helped me get acquainted about general situation from first hand. During the time of my visit, the most pending issue was the reform of the Election Law, that was supposed to be agreed by the main stakeholders in the country because of the legal deadline that was 2 May. On behalf of the OSCE PA I urged them to work together and to come to an agreement in order to be in time and meet the legal deadline. Before and after my visit, the EU and the USA envoys have facilitated talks between political leaders on a comprehensive package of constitutional and electoral reform, some progress was made during discussions, however no consensus was reached. Some political parties committed to working on the reform of the Election Law after the 2 October elections. On 4 May, the Central Election Commission announced the general elections for 2 October in which citizens will vote for six direct electoral contests at different levels: House of Representatives, Presidency, House of Representatives of FBiH, Parliament of Republika Srpska and cantonal level. Women continue to be under-represented in the political and institutional life. After the 2018 general elections, at the state level, the total number of elected women in the BiH House of Representatives was 16%. At the entity level, it was 24% in the FBiH House of Representatives and 16% in the RS National Assembly. Women retain 2 out of 10 state-level ministers, 3 out of 17 ministers in the government of the FBiH, and 6 out of 17 of RS.

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. Some of them stressed that the Office of the High Representative must intervene if the budget is not approved.
- 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.
- IDPs and refugees from the war in the 90s are still waiting for a permanent housing solution. Some issue has improved over recent years, and that in RS all former "collective centers" for IDPs have been closed, while in the FBiH 70 % of them have been closed.

- Expressed a full support to the initiative of Joint Collegium to request a shortened procedure for BiH's accession to the EU. 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.
- Warned that countries in the region are procuring more and more conventional weapons and missiles, and the neighboring countries stopped providing information about it, despite their obligation to do so, included in the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control of 1996, signed under the supervision of the OSCE.
- 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.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia will be chairing the OSCE in 2023, they are active in the work of OSCE Troika and the authorities are looking forward to their Chairmanship, although they are very much aware of the challenges that are in front of them and overall dealing as OSCE Chair with the war in Ukraine. North Macedonia together with Serbia and Albania are part of the "Open Balkan" initiative. The recent meeting that took place in Ohrid, North Macedonia, the Prime Ministers of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the meeting and both of them said publicly that they are seriously considering to be part of the initiative. In my visit to North Macedonia, I was told that the Governments of Bulgaria and North Macedonia signed a friendship treaty to bolster the relations between the two Balkan states on 1 August 2017. The so-called Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness and Cooperation was ratified by the Parliaments of the Republic of North Macedonia and Bulgaria on 15 and 18 January 2018, respectively. A Joint commission on historical and educational issues was formed in 2018 to serve as a forum where controversial historical and educational issues could be raised and discussed. According to the reports, this commission has made little progress in its work for a period of one year. We were told that Sofia and Skopje were talking directly in order to overcome issues that are of concern for both countries. I stressed in both countries that dialogue is the only tool to overcome contested issues, and it is not only about the veto of Bulgaria on EU accession of North Macedonia, but it is about the creation of a healthy relationship between countries and people.

Women are represented 41% in the Parliament of North Macedonia and 4/21 (19%) in the Government.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in North Macedonia

- North Macedonia became the 30th NATO member and their next priority is to become an EU member.
- 75% of citizens support joining the EU, however they are disappointed with the slow process.
- Top priority for the Government of North Macedonia is opening the negotiations with the EU.
- North Macedonia has very good relations with almost all its neighbors, would want to solve the issue with Bulgaria.
- All political parties are engaged on the EU integration process, as they said, it is for the safety of the citizens. But the dispute with Bulgaria, the economic crisis and the war in Ukraine are disturbing this process.
- The reform of the Electoral Code according to the recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR requires time and should therefore start soon.
- There is a need for fighting the high corruption. According to polls, only 8% of the people trust the judiciary in North Macedonia.
- The “Open Balkan” initiative is a good one but without other countries the project is incomplete.
- In the recent years, the inter-ethnic relations have improved a lot.

Albania

In my visit to Albania as Special Representative on SEE of the OSCE PA, I had a chance to learn more about the internal political dynamics and their process of reforms. In my meetings with the state officials and the representatives of the opposition, I have got an impression that reforms are the main objectives for all of them, especially reforms in judiciary. In order to be more successful in the reforms, they need wider consensus in parliament, and in the recent case for the election of President, the Parliament had no consensus for 3/5 in the three rounds of voting the president, then the president was elected by the simple majority as is stipulated by the Law too. I congratulated the Speaker of Parliament on the election of Mr. Bajram Begaj as the new President of Albania. It is worth mentioning that almost all interlocutors spoke highly about the neighboring countries and stressed that regional cooperation is very important for Albania and its citizens. Albania together with Serbia and North Macedonia is co-founder of “Open Balkan” initiative. Albania is a non-permanent member of the Security Council for the period 2022-2023 and held OSCE Chairmanship in 2020.

Albania is making progress in the field of gender equality, there are 51/140 (36%) women in Parliament and 12/17 (70.5%) female Ministers.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Albania

- Albania plays a positive role in the Balkan region. The “Open Balkan” initiative is a good project, free movement of goods and people is what they need in the region. Albania is not as it was 10 years ago, they have excellent relationship with all their neighbors and the “Open Balkan” initiative will help the region to improve further good neighboring relationship.
- Corruption has been a particular burden, but they are trying to reform the judiciary to be fully independent. Some former ministers are tried for corruption.
- Everyone is waiting for the EU Ministerial Meeting in June, especially North Macedonia and Albania, who are “treated as a package”.
- The committee for electoral reform should start to work on the Electoral Law, based on the recommendations from OSCE/ODIHR. The first meeting of the committee was held on 17 June 2022, the opposition participated in the meeting.
- They expressed a need of the OSCE’s support in their EU integration journey.
- The OSCE’s Women Peace and Security agenda is very important, together with the OSCE PiA Albania will work on implementation of the Action Plan that was approved.
- Beside other important issues, as non-permanent member of the UN Security, Council Albania will have gender mainstreaming on top of its agenda.

Montenegro

In Montenegro I met the Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament, my meetings took place two weeks after they have been elected. The Montenegrin Parliament elected a minority government, because the previous government has lost the majority in the parliament. The new Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic said that the new government would unblock the process of EU integration and will rest on two main pillars, the rule of law and economic development. They need to appoint a Chief Prosecutor and new judges. For the appointments in the judiciary, they require an agreement in parliament and put together a strong majority (that will also allow them to successfully implement Chapters 23 and 24 in order to meet the expectations of the EU). For the appointments they need 54 votes in the first voting round, for the second round they need 49 votes, currently their majority consists of 46 MPs. The appointment of Judicial Council is not problematic, but the appointment of Chief Prosecutor it is a problem. Montenegro is ahead of its neighbors in the process of EU integration; they opened 33 chapters and so far closed three of them.

Women are represented 22/81 (22%) in the Parliament of Montenegro and 4/21 (19%) women Ministers.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Montenegro

- Regional co-operation is fundamental for the security of all citizens; such co-operation should also involve the economic sector (unblocking economy and trade in the region is beneficial for all citizens of the region).
- The “Open Balkan” initiative is not covering all six Western Balkans countries because there is no trust between them. The Government of Montenegro is considering being part of the “Open Balkan” initiative.

- Effective institutions and rule of law are a priority. Montenegro made some progress, but they need to do more.
- Regarding the fight against corruption and organized crime, the new government's top priority is to fight corruption and organized crime, with the assistance of INTERPOL and international community they arrested members of two international criminal organizations. Montenegrin authorities arrested the former President of the Supreme Court and the President of the Commercial Court and they are investigating high rank police officers.
- The Constitutional Court is working under limited capacities, that is why they need an urgent quality dialogue in order to fill the vacant positions in the judiciary and ensure full functionality of state institutions, otherwise it can come to blockage of the institutions.
- Nationalism is connected with corruption and weak institutions, as well as to external influences.
- The progress of Montenegro toward EU integration is important, because it is an example that EU enlargement is alive.

Romania

My interlocutors in Romania expressed unanimous support to the EU perspective of the Western Balkan countries, some of them welcomed NATO enlargement in South East Europe.

The situation in Moldova was mentioned several times by Romanian interlocutors who expressed a concern for the high number of refugee flows, in this regard support from the EU and increased international attention was encouraged.

My idea to establish an inter-parliamentary forum or conference with the participation of OSCE PA Delegations from South East Europe, as a platform to advance regional co-operation, based on the three dimensions of the OSCE PA was welcomed by all interlocutors.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Romania

- Concerning the crisis in Ukraine: An unprecedented rate of refugees are fleeing from the country, they require important resources, which are increasing; Romania has shown solidarity, as a country, as well as personally by its citizens; efforts are being undertaken by the border police to facilitate the transfer of migrants; Romania carries out information campaigns to combat human trafficking and takes into due account that a large number of weapons are circulating with authorities not having full control over them; important humanitarian aid has been delivered to Ukraine through Romania and is an ongoing effort.
- Romania is helping Moldova with regard to humanitarian assistance, since they are hosting a large number of refugees.
- About 1.150.000 refugees entered Romania since the start of the war in Ukraine, about 86.000 are currently in Romania.
- For hosting refugees, Romania is spending 25€ per person per night, the European Union has so far contributed with 1.000.000€.
- Romania is reducing its energy dependency from the Russian Federation, about 80% is currently covered by domestic production.
- Romania joined Greece and Bulgaria on a common acquisition of gas to be prepared for the winter season.

- Romania also support the EU perspective of the Western Balkan countries, but are concerned by certain positions of closeness assumed by these countries toward Russia and China.

Bulgaria

In my meetings in Sofia with the interlocutors we discussed the domestic political scene and topics such as: relationship with North Macedonia, situation with refugees from Ukraine and energy supply. Interlocutors in Bulgaria expressed a general support of the EU integration of the Western Balkan countries, and elaborated the current position of every Western Balkan country in regard to the process of EU integration.

My idea to establish an inter-parliamentary forum or conference with the participation of OSCE PA Delegations from South East Europe, as a platform to advance regional co-operation, based on the three dimensions of the OSCE PA was welcomed by the interlocutors in Sofia.

The most relevant points raised by the interlocutors in Bulgaria

- Since the Russian suspension, Bulgaria has increased its gas imports from Azerbaijan, raising it to about 33%. The Greece-Bulgaria gas interconnector (IGB) which is planned to start operating in the next months should allow us to reach 50% of our gas needs. They plan to obtain the remaining 50% via liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports from the United States of America and other sources.
- The Trans-Balkan pipeline and reverse flows will allow them to provide gas to neighboring countries, further enhancing co-operation in the region.
- Bulgaria is closely cooperating with North Macedonia on energy supplies.
- Bulgaria has doubts regarding the number of Bulgarians in North Macedonia according to the 2021 census, and the question of the language, history and identity of North Macedonia is contested by Bulgaria.
- Concerning Ukraine, Bulgaria is providing support and shelter to about 100.000 refugees.
- The Political situations is not stabile, it is not easy to have a coalition of four political parties.
- Concerning North Macedonia, they said that European integration should be based on the principle of merits and welcomed the improvements of the recent period in North Macedonia.
- Bulgaria and North Macedonia conduct bilateral meetings at the highest-level but continue to have some issues.
- The representation of the Bulgarian community in North Macedonia and the implementation of the 2017 friendship treaty are still subject of discussion.
- There are no issues with the other countries in the South East Europe, full support of Bulgaria

Analyses of the situation in the South East Europe

South East Europe and in particular Western Balkans have been and still are in the priorities list for the OSCE. The fact that there are six missions in the region it shows the commitment of the OSCE on the progress of the situation in Western Balkans. In my recent visits to; Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro, it was very clear to me about the work of the missions that are highly recognized by all institutions, oppositions, civil society and other international organizations that are present in those countries. We as OSCE PA strongly support the work of the OSCE Missions in the region and praise all Heads of Missions and their staff on their achieved results, results that are recognized by the host countries and their citizens. Beside the achieved results in all Western Balkans countries, due to the fragile situation in the region there is still a need to do more. The fact that there are still OSCE Missions, and appointed special envoys for Western Balkans of; EU, Germany, US and UK it necessary for the OSCE PA to pay attention too. Since my appointment as OSCE PA's SR on SEE I have seen a lot of presidents, prime minister and ministers of foreign affairs of Germany, UK, Türkiye and other respective countries visiting the region. It shows that the region has friends in all over the world, and I call on all leaders of the region to respect the efforts of their friends which are trying to assist the region in achieving results in; economy, security, regional co-operation and other spheres of interest for their countries.

On the 23 June, in the European Council summit in Brussels was not decided anything new regarding the enlargement of Western Balkan countries. The political leaders from the Western Balkan countries were expecting for the granting of EU candidate status to BiH, opening accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania, and enabling visa liberalization for Kosovo. The political leaders from Western Balkans after the summit criticized the approach of the European Union toward Bulgaria after the latter's refusal to lift the veto on Skopje, stalling the entire negotiation process for both North Macedonia and Albania, and they said that after the decision of the European Council they are more encouraged to have better regional co-operation in the "Open Balkan" initiative. According to the news, on 24 June, positive steps for a future understanding were undertaken by Bulgaria. The EU accession question remains open.

Some of the concerning issues that are in common for all SEE countries are:

1. Reform of the election laws,
2. Depopulation of the region,
3. Hate speech,
4. Constant tensions.

1. In order to improve the process of elections, after every election the OSCE/ODIHR issues a report on their findings, then the ODIHR recommends to the respective country to amend their election code and for the following elections to have as better as possible laws in place. In my visit in each country in the Western Balkans, I encouraged them to start immediately the reforms of their election laws

according to the ODIHR recommendations. We witnessed the case of the reform of the Election Law in BiH, they started too late and in the end they didn't have enough time to come to an agreement. There was not enough of meaningful dialogue between political parties, that is why we call on future MPs of BiH to start immediately to work on the election code.

2. We have heard in every country we visited that the main problem is depopulation and brain drain. According to some interlocutors they will work on strategy that can prevent further depopulation in their countries. I believe that there are a lot of factors that lead to depopulation, but the main ones are economic and political stability. I am not promoting or praising the "Open Balkan" initiative, however better cooperation and free movement of people and goods leads to the decrease of tensions in the region and obviously could boost an economic growth due to the bigger market. 16,5 million people live in the Western Balkans, it is a serious market for goods and for labor. In the last meeting that was held in Ohrid, North Macedonia, it is promising that beside economic issues they are trying to solve the issue of the recognition of diplomas and other obstacles that can ease employment in the region.

3. Although the inter-ethnic relations have improved in the region, the Hate Speech is of concern according to the interlocutors. It is a concern because the hate speech is used mainly by politicians and it is used in parliaments and in media. According to the same interlocutors, the Hate Speech can jeopardize achievements in inter-ethnic and inter-countries relations, then that can trigger reactions of other ethnic groups or other countries. This concern was addressed to the OSCE PA because they think that we can address it to all politicians and we can call on them to avoid using Hate Speech.

4. Keeping the region under the constant tensions is not helpful for the future of the region and for their citizens. Tensions can contribute on the depopulation of the region. Perception of insecurity motivates people to move toward the western countries.

After incidents in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina; in Bitola was set on fire the Bulgarian Cultural Centre and vandals have attacked the Partisan Memorial Cemetery in Mostar and smashed hundreds of engraved stone memorial markers commemorating anti-fascist fighters who died during World War II, it was immediate reactions by politicians. Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Bulgaria and North Macedonia, Teodora Genchovska and Bujar Osmani met immediately after the incident and they jointly and strongly condemned the incident in Bitola. The same happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the politicians strongly condemned the vandalism.

This is a right course of action in how to respond to the extremism in the region.

Cooperation of the South East European countries in the field of economy and environment

The western Balkan countries are members of the Central European Free Trade Agreement-CEFTA, due to that the cooperation among the countries has improved. In the recent years the infrastructure has improved and modernized a lot which makes it easy to transport goods.

All member (including Moldova) of CEFTA comprise a total area of 253,000 km² and about 20.12 million people. This is 0.17% of the habitable area around the world and 0.26% of the world population. With an economic output of 124.84 billion US dollars annually, they represent around 0.15

percent of the global economy. The value of all exported goods of these 7 countries was 52.43 billion US dollars per year.¹

The countries of the Western Balkans seek membership in the European Union (EU), which requires them to harmonize their legislation and policies with those of the EU in several sectors, including energy, transport and climate protection. This obliges these countries to achieve the EU energy and climate goals.

While some cities in the region have already drawn up plans according to EU standards, there is still a lack of the capabilities required for implementation. Yet, it is vital that these countries actively contribute towards achieving climate targets, while also becoming more proficient in urban design, climate resilience and disaster preparedness, mobility and energy. Several institutions and initiatives governmental and non-governmental are already working on improvements.

The Western Balkan countries are part of the Berlin Process. The Berlin Process is an intergovernmental cooperation initiative aimed at revitalizing the multilateral ties between the Western Balkans and selected EU member states, and at improving regional cooperation in the Western Balkans on the issues of infrastructure and economic development. There are six fields that are covered under the Berlin Process;

- Regional cooperation and the solution of bilateral disputes
- Rule of Law and Good Governance
- Economic Prosperity and Connectivity
- Market integration – Trade Facilitation, Mobility and Joint Growth Initiatives
- Migration and the fight against terrorism and radicalization
- Youth, Education, Science and Research

According to the founders of the "Open Balkan" initiative, the aim of the initiative is to speed up the EU integration process and the initiative is not a substitute of the Berlin Process but it is part of it.

On 8 June 2022 it was held Open Balkan Summit in Ohrid, North Macedonia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, and North Macedonia's Prime Minister Dimitar Kovacevski as founders and members of the Open Balkan initiative, the summit was also attended by Montenegrin Prime Minister Dritan Abazovic and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina Zoran Tegeltija. Some agreements were signed during the summit; on mutual recognition of diplomas and academic qualifications and other related to the cooperation in the areas of culture, tourism, and the economy.

Future activities

As a proposal for future engagement within the OSCE PA with MPs from South East Europe, in my visits I proposed holding periodic meetings of OSCE PA Delegations from the region and the idea was very welcomed. These would take place in their capitals on a rotation basis. The OSCE PA, as a platform for dialogue, can facilitate parliamentary diplomacy and report to national governments on their work and findings. The Delegations to the OSCE PA, composed by representatives of diverse parties allow us to have comprehensive discussions on the most relevant issues. We have the responsibility to keep such channels open at the time of crisis in multilateral relations. Further, Covid-19 has suspended for long time opportunities to meet in person, and I believe the OSCE PA should now capitalize this

¹ <https://www.worlddata.info/trade-agreements/cefta-free-trade-agreement.php>

opportunity. We have noticed that there is not enough meaningful dialogue in the region, neither intra-country nor inter-countries. We believe that through the platform/conference for dialogue we can additionally strengthen the regional cooperation.

The topics that can be discussed in the meetings can be from the fields of the three dimensions of the OSCE;

- Political Affairs and Security
- Economic Affairs, Science, Technology and Environment
- Democracy, Human Rights and Humanitarian Questions

The idea was well received by all interlocutors I met in my recent visits, and some of them volunteered to host the first meeting in their country. Perhaps the best idea is to start with the alphabetic order. At the earliest, I will be communicating with the all Delegations of the SEE region about the matters related to modality, date and topics of the Forum/Conference of the OSCE PA to be held.

In conclusion, I would like to praise the work and the cooperation between OSCE PA International Secretariat Office in Vienna, particularly Francesco Pagani - Deputy Special Representative in Vienna, Chief Political Advisor; Sherif Abdili - Programme and Administrative Officer and Roberto Ferrari - Junior Professional Officer, who assisted me, as well as the OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and the OSCE Missions in the region that made my visits very successful. I would as well like to thank the members of the Delegations from the region to the OSCE PA for the great hospitality they offered during my visits.