



OSCE PA Special Representative on South East Europe,

Dr. Kyriakos Hadjiyianni – Report on South East Europe

September 2023 -July 2024

31st OSCE PA Annual Session, 29 June - 4 July 2024, Bucharest

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 is worth 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 Srpska (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.

4. Albania, Tirana – 11 April 2024

In Albania, I had meetings with Ms. Clarisse Pasztory, Acting Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Mr. Mark Marku, the Head of journalism Department of University of Tirana and representatives of some local Non-Governmental Organizations.

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 progress on the rule of law and the continued implementation of reform in the justice systems and public administration as well as the progress made on the fight against corruption and organised crime. At the same time, they underline the need of step-up efforts to cooperate on investigations, including with the European Anti-Fraud Office and Albania's commitment to further strengthen the protection of fundamental rights, including media freedom and freedom of expression, and to consolidate property rights in a transparent manner.

The demographic problem was also discussed, which has reached uncontrollable proportions with more than a million citizens leaving Albania over the last decade, due to widespread corruption and the involvement of the political system with organized crime.

Much of the discussion was also devoted to the Freddy Beleri case. It was said by some non-governmental organizations that the imprisonment of Beleri is being instrumentalized by the political authorities as part of a wider effort to expropriate the property of residents of Himarra and citizens throughout Albania.

The interlocutors also 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.

5. First Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the South East Europe Delegations to the OSCE PA – Albania, Tirana, 12 – 14 April.

Between 12 and 14 March 2024, the First Inter-Parliamentary Forum of the South East Delegations to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly was held on my initiative as a Special Representative of the Assembly on South East Region. The initial idea and goal of the Forum was of the to bring together the PA Delegations, where they could learn from each other and bring their respective countries closer to each other. The Forum was hosted by the Albanian Delegation to the OSCE PA, with support from the Albanian Parliament and was attended by parliamentary delegations from the Albania, Italy, Greece, Hungary, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

Opening remarks in the Forum were made by the President of the Albanian Parliament, Ms. Lindita Nikolla, the Head of the Albanian delegation to the OSCE PA, Mr. Damian Gjikhuri and by me. Moreover Ms. Majlinda Dhuka, Minister of State and Chief Negotiator for Albania's accession negotiations and Ms. Clarisse Pasztory, Acting Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, participated also in the Forum as keynote speakers.

In my introductory speech I addressed, among other things, the challenges that the Western Balkan countries are facing, which, are becoming even more intensified due to the current developments in the global geopolitical arena. These developments, underline more and more the importance of unity among the Western Balkan countries and of building closer cooperation with the European Union on the basis of common principles and values. In this context, I stressed also that the Members of the Parliament should show their commitment to achieving sustainable peace in the region, inspired by the principles of the Helsinki Final Act. The OSCE PA offers the opportunity to take steps forward by establishing good neighbourly relations, exchanging ideas and experiences and coordinating initiatives to accelerate collective progress and the Forum seeks to become an institutionalized event within the OSCE PA contributing to efforts for political, economic and social progress in the region.

The Speaker of the Albanian Parliament, Ms. Nikolla, referred to the different speeds of the democratization and integration processes which have created and may continue to create implications for stability, peace and security in the region and beyond. Therefore, she noted, the more developed and the faster our countries integrate, the better they can face the threats coming from outside the region.

Mr. Damian Gjicknuri reported on the benefits of the OSCE PA and the Forum in strengthening parliamentary cooperation between the Western Balkan countries to address common challenges. He added that speaking freely, openly and without barriers, we can express the feelings, expectations and interests of our citizens so that we can support each other.

Clarisse Pasztory, Acting Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, provided an overview of the organization's work over the years and its current programmes and projects. Following this, State Minister and Chief Negotiator on European Integration, Majlinda Dhuka, offered detailed insights into the government's efforts toward European integration.

The agenda covered discussions on the work of the OSCE Presence in Albania, EU integration of Albania and the Western Balkan countries, and co-operation among delegations to the OSCE PA. Participants shared concerns on topics such as irregular migration, foreign investment, tourism, cultural exchange, depopulation of the region, science diplomacy and best practices regarding solidarity among South East European countries in the face of past natural disasters.

At the end of the Forum the participants from the South East European Delegations to the OSCE PA, affirm their unwavering commitment to fostering enhanced co-operation and friendly relations among countries and peoples within the region through this Forum which serves as an invaluable arena for members of delegations from the region to engage in meaningful exchanges, fortify collaboration, and plan a more prosperous trajectory for the South East European region. Moreover, the participants agreed to move forward with specific activities in the near future on priority issues such as tourism, energy, migration, science diplomacy, depopulation and brain drain and attracting foreign investments in the countries of South East Europe region.

It was also agreed that the next meeting of the Forum will be held in Montenegro to discuss tourism as a vital branch of the regional economy. By the end of the year will be held another Forum in Greece followed by a Forum in Hungary.

6. Seminar on the Role of Parliaments in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations organized by George C. Marshall, a European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch - Partenkirchen, Germany, 22 – 25 April

Between 22 and 25 April 2024, I participated as a keynote speaker in a seminar organized by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in cooperation with the bipartisan House Democracy Partnership (HDP) Committee of the US House of Representatives, on the topic: "The Role of Parliaments in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations which was held in Garmisch – Partenkirchen in Germany. At the seminar, which is a Regional Exchange for Members of Parliament and Staff from Georgia, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and the United States, I made a presentation in the section on Civil Society and Parliaments during and post – conflict.

In this panel, we discussed the way of interaction between civil society, private sector, and the media regarding the Parliaments' role in military oversight during and after conflict. We examined strategies for effectively communicating parliamentary initiatives, addressing public concerns, and ensuring accountability to all stakeholders involved in conflict and post-conflict settings. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the importance of collaborative approaches between parliamentarians and stakeholders in promoting informed decision-making and facilitating meaningful dialogue towards sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

In my introductory speech I pointed out that in times of conflict civil society organizations and parliaments have an important contribution in promoting stability, dialogue and rebuilding trust between the fighting parties. Moreover, in post-war periods, civil society and parliaments act as pillars of support for peace, respect for human rights and the socio-economic reconstruction of societies affected by conflict.

Regarding the conflict in the former Yugoslavia¹, I underlined the important role played by civil society in providing psychosocial support to the victims, in providing humanitarian assistance and in defending peace and justice. I also commended the contribution of non-governmental organizations in providing humanitarian assistance to vulnerable civilians, regardless of their nationality, providing food, medical care and protection, and were also involved in defending the protection of human rights and justice for victims of war crimes. As regards Cyprus, I highlighted the contribution of civil society in promoting reconciliation and peace.

On the role of parliaments, I highlighted the critical work they do in rebuilding conflict-affected communities by enacting legislation, overseeing government actions and reallocating resources. In addition, through participatory processes, parliaments can

¹ It refers to the Kosovo war which was an armed conflict in Kosovo and lasted from 28 February 1998 until 11 June 1999. The war was fought between the forces of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (i.e. Serbia and Montenegro), which controlled Kosovo before the war, and the Kosovo Albanian separatist militia known as the Kosovo Liberation Army.

facilitate the inclusion of different views in decision-making, enhancing trust and legitimacy.

I also stressed that cooperation between parliaments and civil society is essential for effective post-conflict reconstruction. However, I cannot but acknowledge the existence of challenges that affect their effective cooperation such as limited resources, institutional weaknesses, political instability and mistrust. To overcome these challenges, continuous efforts to promote transparency, accountability and more participatory governance mechanisms are needed.

Finally, I criticized the continued shrinking of civil society space in some OSCE participating States and I called for support and strengthening of civil society, stressing that the role of such organizations is important not only during and after conflicts, but also in times of peace.

7. Elections in North – Macedonia, 6 – 10 May 2024

The parliamentary and presidential elections in North Macedonia, were competitive, and fundamental freedoms were respected, although the process remains insufficiently regulated. The election legislation provided a suitable framework for holding democratic elections, but persisting inconsistencies, gaps, and ambiguities compromised legal certainty and merit revision. Unfortunately, the extensive and pluralistic campaign marred by negative rhetoric with nationalistic slogans, as well as shortcomings in the legislation and insufficient oversight of campaign finances.

The elections took place against a background of voter dissatisfaction with the political establishment, and a general sense that both the government and opposition lacked the will to address long-standing calls for comprehensive reforms. Although the legal framework created the basis for democratic elections, many gaps and inconsistencies remained, making further reform essential.

It worth be noting that North Macedonia has made progress in advancing gender equality in political and public life, as demonstrated in these elections in which women comprised 43 per cent of parliamentary candidates. Moreover, North Macedonia's media landscape was diverse and media freedom largely respected.

Moreover, in Skopje, I had the opportunity to meet with various stakeholders, including, government officials, representatives from academia and civil society organizations (CSOs). Namely I met with Dr. Susan Penksa, Acting Head of the Mission in North Macedonia, Mr. Dusko Uzunovski, Head of EU Directorate and Ms. Jadranka Causevska, Head of Department at Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I met also with the Dean of Law Faculty of State University in Skopje named St. Cyril and Methodius and representatives of local non-governmental organizations.

In the meeting with Dr. Penksa, I had the opportunity to get informed about the Mission's key priorities which basically are advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations and supporting the further implementation of the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement and its essential pillars: anti-discrimination, education, decentralization, equitable representation, smaller communities and the use of languages. I also had the chance to get updated for the reforms in areas such as elections, democratic policing, local governance and the judiciary.

In the other meetings with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I congratulated the interlocutors on North Macedonia's recent Chairmanship of the OSCE in 2023 on behalf of the OSCE PA. The meetings were an opportunity to listen to regional co-operation initiatives as well as bilateral relations with neighbouring countries. The interlocutors outlined ongoing efforts to advance the European Union accession process and expectations for the decision of the European Council on opening negotiations with North Macedonia as well as the precondition by Bulgarian government for the opening of North Macedonia accession talks in order the Bulgarian ethnic minority to be included in the Constitution of North Macedonia.

I was also informed about reform efforts in the area of fundamental principles and the rule of law. From the discussions it emerged that that more progress should be made on the independence, professionalism and impartiality of the judiciary, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the reform of the public administration. Fundamental rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities or communities, media freedom and freedom of expression, should also be further strengthened.

Much of the discussion also focused on the fact that the new President of the country during her inauguration called her country "Macedonia", which calls into question the Prespa agreement and consequently its bilateral relations with Greece.

Finally, I had also the chance to meet with the Dean of Law Faculty of State University in Skopje St. Cyril and Methodius in an in an effort to promote scientific diplomacy aimed at promoting broader diplomacy between the countries of South East Europe.

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 and Pristina next September. Moreover, we have organized the 2nd Meeting of the Interparliamentary Forum which will be held in Montenegro next September. In addition, I will visit Moldova by the end of the year to have bilateral meetings with various state officials. I believe that we have to capitalize opportunities to meet in person, in South East Europe because we have noticed that there is not enough meaningful dialogue in the region, neither intra-country nor inter-

countries. We believe that through the OSCE PA as a platform for dialogue and the Forum as well we can additionally strengthen the regional cooperation.

In conclusion, I would like to praise the work and the cooperation between OSCE PA International Secretariat Office in Vienna, particularly Sherif Abdili - Programme and Administrative, who assisted me, as well as 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.