

Interview with Ambassador Brian Aggeler, Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina
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1. After you took office, visited cities in BiH, and had discussions with governmental representatives, what is your assessment of the current political situation in BiH?

It is a great privilege to serve in Bosnia and Herzegovina together with our dedicated team at the OSCE Mission to BiH. This is a beautiful country with wonderful people who deserve a bright future, and the Mission will continue to be a sincere and dedicated partner in helping them achieve that.

BiH indeed faces some real challenges. Many political leaders seem more interested in their own political battles than in finding solutions for the country. Corruption has a significant negative impact on the daily lives of the people of this country, with a culture of impunity due to lack of prosecutions and, according to some indicators, the situation is actually getting worse. And too often, education policies and practices in BiH help fuel rather than prevent ethnic division across the country, depriving many children of the inclusive, non-discriminatory, high-quality education they deserve.

Still, after meeting with citizens and many dedicated officials across the country, I am convinced BiH can indeed make meaningful progress – if the country’s elected representatives have the courage to take the necessary steps. In that sense, the recent general election and formation of new authorities also offers new opportunities.

I’ve had the chance to talk with many of these political leaders since I assumed my post in October. Everyone has stressed their commitment to moving BiH forward on its reform path: creating jobs, fighting corruption and promoting the rule of law, ensuring high-quality education and caring for the environment.

We all want to believe that this is not mere rhetoric. To keep up the momentum and move forward for the citizens of this country, BiH’s elected leaders – as well as police, prosecutors, and judges - need to stand up, put aside their differences and get to work.

2. What is your assessment of governmental authorities formation process following the general elections held in October?

I am pleased that the new convocation of the BiH Council of Ministers has been appointed faster than ever before, bringing some new faces and coalitions in place at different levels. We hope this will bring much needed momentum to the reform processes I mentioned earlier, especially in the light of recently granted EU candidate status. Our Mission is eager to engage with the new leadership to make these efforts a success; with political will, much is possible.

3. The High Representative in BiH imposed amendments to the Election Law and to the Constitution of the Federation of BiH on the Election Day. What is your opinion regarding the matter? Do you think that it could unblock processes or complicate the situation further?

There is no question that the election legislation of BiH needs to be revised in a comprehensive manner. The country's citizens want this, too - over 60 per cent of respondents believe it is important to amend the Election Law, according to a survey our Mission conducted in 2022.

Since authorities have failed to do this, the unresolved amendments to the BiH Election Law continued to pose an obstacle to ensuring future timely and fair elections in the country and the functionality of government and government formation, and further decreased the trust of citizens in the integrity and transparency of the voting process.

What is important to highlight is that no one wants the OHR to impose solutions, including the OHR itself. This measure was in response to a situation where BiH politicians failed to do their jobs. This can be frustrating for citizens but, 27 years after the war, political leaders need to take more responsibility so there is less need for the international community to solve problems.

4. What is your opinion of the fact that hate speech may have occurred more often during this election campaign than ever before?

Compared to the previous election cycles, the trend of using offensive, divisive or humiliating language during election campaigns actually appears to be somewhat decreasing, as indicated in the results contained in the Mission-supported analysis issued by the Press and Online Media Council of BiH.¹ These results highlight the success of efforts that media outlets have exerted to reduce the number of negative comments. Unfortunately, however, hate speech as well as bias-motivated incidents and hate crimes remain prevalent in BiH, often targeting those who are already marginalized and vulnerable. Through the Mission's eight field offices, we had

¹ [“STOP! Hate Speech” campaign concludes in Bosnia and Herzegovina | OSCE Završni Izvještaj govora mržnje u komentarima na online portalima.pdf \(vzs.ba\)](#)

eyes and ears on the ground following the situation in the run-up to and during the elections. We track and take note of all such incidents, including election-related ones. OSCE provides hate crimes-related training to courts and police across the country as part of wider Mission efforts to address and improve judicial responses to bias-motivated violence.

Whenever they occur, be it during elections or any other time, such incidents require meaningful and effective institutional responses and reactions, including by justice sector actors. Such divisive activity and speech must be properly addressed to ensure equitable and safe communities.

At the same time, hate speech legislation must not be abused to attack the important work of legitimate journalists. Unfortunately, our monitoring shows that journalists in BiH are being targeted more often by threats, physical and cyber-attacks, as well as on-line smear campaigns. Journalists play a vital role in informing citizens on critical issues and help hold powerful individuals and institutions to account in the interests of protecting and strengthening democratic societies.

5. What is your opinion of the response of the BiH authorities in reference to the migration situation?

The dramatic increase in the number of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (MRAs) entering the country in 2018 certainly challenged BiH's human and financial resources. Co-ordination and communication between institutions across levels of government was an issue.

Since 2018, much has improved on this front, including the provision of adequate shelter and care for MRAs. But challenges remain, and though the number of MRAs has now decreased, relevant institutions need to continue their readiness to co-ordinate and respond as necessary. Migration routes constantly change, and the numbers could once again increase. The Mission is actively engaged in supporting BiH efforts to improve border management, and ensuring that the human rights of MRAs are respected, with international standards respected in processing cases of trafficking human beings.

6. BiH received the candidate status for membership of the European Union. What should now be the priority of the BiH governmental representatives?

The European Council granting Bosnia and Herzegovina candidate status is an important opportunity, if the country's elected leaders accept it as an impetus to carry out much needed work on long-delayed and urgent reforms in pursuit of the country's stated goal of European integration.

Necessary reforms include strengthening the rule of law and good governance; protecting fundamental rights; combating corruption and organized crime; and strengthening mutual trust,

understanding and respect between communities. The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina is an active partner in working towards these goals. Our Mission has organized training on ethical standards and disciplinary practices for newly appointed judges and prosecutors in both entities. We carry out trial monitoring to identify and assess systemic rule of law and criminal justice issues. Together with the EU and US Embassy in BiH, the OSCE Mission supports initiatives for the development and adoption of conflict of interest legislation in line with international standards.

There is much work to be done, and together we can help BiH achieve its full potential for all citizens. This is especially important for the young people of this country, who are leaving this country in search of better prospects and stability. To stem the high rate of brain drain here, young people need to see a possibility to build a stable, secure future in their homeland.

7. UN is of the opinion that in BiH there are conditions that enable the rise of extremism. What is the OSCE Mission's view regarding that fact?

Radicalization leading to violence and terrorism is a global issue and poses a serious challenge for many countries. Our BiH partners are committed to countering violent extremism and radicalization in all its forms, and in its earliest stages. The Mission supports these efforts on several fronts, including through a new comprehensive intelligence-led-policing project that is helping modernize police work and that promotes collaborative and proactive law enforcement - a prerequisite for fighting serious security threats.

Law enforcement alone is, however, not enough. Given the complex interplay of factors that influence each individual process of radicalization to violence, as well as the range of social pressures, problems and challenges involved, an integrated, multi-sector approach is necessary for ensuring effective prevention.

There has to be collaboration, including among religious communities, the police, the judiciary, media, educators, health and social protection services, as well as NGOs, and the issue has to be recognized and treated by society and local community as a whole. I am very pleased that, in addition to engagement by the security sector, we have seen increasing involvement by all these actors in BiH to help prevent violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism.

8. What will be your priorities during your term as the Head of the OSCE Mission to BiH?

As the Head of Mission, my primary goal is to support positive reforms in BiH, ensuring stability and prosperity for all citizens. In the first months in my role, I travelled extensively to meet with citizens and hear their views on the future of BiH and how they believe the OSCE Mission to BiH can help. Our teams in the Mission's eight field offices across the country make this direct contact with BiH citizens possible, and their insights on their local situations are invaluable in informing our engagement.

What I learned from these visits and meetings at the local level is that citizens, as well as many local leaders, understand that they have much more to gain from collaboration and mutual co-

operation, regardless of their backgrounds. For example, there are schools and communities that make it a priority to nurture tolerance and respect for others, and we support their efforts. Having seen numerous such positive examples, I am optimistic about the fruit these efforts will bear. With these in mind, one of the Mission's main focuses is to help more communities replicate these positive practices.

We want people to hear about the amazing things taking place all over the country, such as what the five mayors from the Majeвица region, from both entities, are doing to jointly promote regional economic development. Or the positive initiatives happening in Bosanski Petrovac or Žepče, progressive communities that are doing more on the local level to create better living conditions for their citizens than many politicians at higher levels of authority.

Underpinning all our efforts is a commitment to advancing gender equality, because we know that only when women and men enjoy equal rights, equal level of representation and have equal access to resources, can societies develop in a peaceful, sustainable, and prosperous manner. And we will also continue to tackle the pressing environmental challenges facing BiH, including through strengthening the role of justice sector professionals, CSOs and others in enhancing the implementation of environmental laws and the realization of the public rights.

I am so pleased that the motto of North Macedonia's OSCE Chair for this year is "it's about people" – because indeed it is. We are not here for politicians or parties, cantons or entities - we are here for the people of this country, as their sincere partners in making this country safe, strong and prosperous. There are so many courageous and committed citizens across this country, and I am looking forward to what we can achieve together!