

Questions for the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Clemens Koja

1.

You have become the head of the OSCE Mission at an exceptionally important moment for Macedonia, a possibility is opened for the country's accession to the EU and NATO, the condition is the implementation of the Name Agreement with Greece. What are the priorities of your mandate in Macedonia as the Head of the OSCE Mission, what will be your focus?

A: Thank you for the opportunity this interview provides to introduce myself to your audience. I am very pleased to have been entrusted to lead the OSCE Mission to Skopje. I have spent several years in the region in Serbia and Slovenia, and I have also served as Austria's Permanent Representative to the OSCE in Vienna. I appreciate the warm welcome I have received from the many interlocutors of the Mission that I have already had the chance to meet. I look forward to continuing an open dialogue, and to supporting your country's efforts to better fulfill its OSCE commitments.

Regarding the Mission's work, we will focus on four priorities: support for implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement and advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations; support for progress in implementing the government's ambitious reform agenda in areas covered by the Mission mandate; help to address Trans-National Threats (including organized crime, cybercrime, trafficking in human beings and violent extremism and radicalization that lead to terrorism); and early warning on security-related developments.

2.

You assumed the function on 17 September, immediately before the referendum on the Agreement with Greece. Your assessment of the referendum, which was held on 30 September; has the Agreement won the support despite the low turnout?

A: I was very glad to arrive here in time for the referendum, knowing what an important time it is for the country. The Mission that I lead did not observe the referendum itself, as we leave that to our ODIHR colleagues. I was nevertheless pleased to see ODIHR's assessment that the referendum was "administered impartially, and that fundamental freedoms were respected throughout the campaign." At the Mission to Skopje, we helped the State Election Commission train polling staff and the MoIA to train police officers of their duties on referendum day, as we have done in the past.

3.

Your assessment on the course of the referendum, the voting process; we've heard the official stance of the OSCE/ODIHR, but the opposition VMRO-DPMNE filed criminal charges against more than 200 persons from election boards, mainly from municipalities with majority Albanian population due to abuses during the referendum?

A: Within the OSCE institutional setting, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights are the experts for observing elections and referenda. Their observation mission functioned independently from the OSCE Mission to Skopje. Accordingly, I must rely on their expertise and assessment, including their Preliminary Statement on 1 October, which I referred to earlier. ODIHR has also observed the process of complaints and appeals, and I look forward to reading their conclusions and recommendations about the whole process in their detailed final report. Let's wait for their expert assessment.

4.

Macedonia is at a new crossroad, support for the constitutional changes which derive from the Prespa Agreement or measuring up of forces at early parliamentary elections? Mr. Koja what do you think is the best for the country at the moment?

A: It is now up to the parliament and the country's political leaders to decide. No one can take this decision for them, and I cannot advise them on which direction to take. I would only say that when such important issues come before Parliament, the Deputies have the responsibility to put the country's interest above all other considerations. If the constitutional amendments move forward, then I will follow the debate closely, and I would expect the process to unfold in line with established procedures and with an opportunity for all views to be heard. On the other hand, if Parliament votes to dissolve and to call for early elections, I expect that ODIHR would come and monitor the campaign and the voting.

5.

The Opposition leader has new demands for the Government, early elections with the formation of the Przino government and public prosecutor proposed by the Opposition or dismissal of the Agreement and elections, to be followed by the election of a public prosecutor with an all-party consensus, something akin to a new SPO; are his demands realistic? SDSM accuses [him] of demanding an amnesty for the former party leader Nikola Gruevski? Do you think that the country should face yet another election?

A: The OSCE has consistently supported accountability, including for all of the alleged abuses heard in the wiretaps. Our Mission has monitored the SPO's cases in court since their beginning, and we continue to monitor ongoing trials. We recently published an interim report of our findings, noting the challenges encountered and the successes achieved by the SPO, and including a number of recommendations that could contribute to the improvement of the legal system. I believe that the issue of accountability is about the rule of law. Serious allegations have been raised, indictments confirmed by the Courts, and trials are ongoing. The defendants are entitled to fair trials, and of course they must be presumed innocent until proven guilty. I believe that the epilogue of the wiretapping affair should be written through the legal process.

6.

Mr. Koja, does Macedonia finally have a functional judicial system, is there a rule of the law?

A: The national judicial system has faced a lot of challenges in the past few years. We strongly believe that an independent, impartial, efficient and transparent judicial system is the foundation for a rule of law-based country. I know that efforts are underway to strengthen the capacity of the judiciary. Passage and implementation of reform legislation is imperative, but the judiciary must also invest itself in the reform process. Only then will it be certain that the administration of justice will prevail. We offer our unwavering support during this important time for the country and look forward to working with the government and the judiciary to support the drafting and implementation of reform laws and to provide capacity-building training.

7.

You come from Austria; your Prime Minister Sebastian Kurz gave full support to the Agreement and the opening of the NATO and EU doors for Macedonia. You have been an ambassador to Belgrade and Ljubljana; you know the circumstances in the region. Austria is

a member of the EU member but not of NATO. What benefits will Macedonia have with the integration into these two alliances?

A: I am proud to have served as Austrian Ambassador in Belgrade and Ljubljana, but here in Skopje you have an Austrian Embassy that can answer better the first part of your question. In my role here with the OSCE, I am of course aware of your country's strategic priorities. Our Mission wishes to be as supportive as possible of your government's reform plans in areas under our mandate, including rule of law, social cohesion and respect for human rights. As your readers may recall, the OSCE Chairperson and the Secretary General were publicly supportive when the Prespa Agreement was announced, with Secretary General Greminger saying that it could lead to a long-term solution for the benefit of all citizens and the entire region.

8.

One of the missions of the OSCE in Macedonia is the border management. The Mission maintains a permanent field presence in the border zones of the former crisis area, reads the website of the OSCE Mission to Skopje. The question is in the context of the ever more present ideas for a possible exchange of borders between Serbia and Kosovo as one of the solutions for their dispute. Is Macedonia endangered by such possibility?

A: We are of course aware of the statements by leaders in Belgrade and Pristina, but it is not my place to speculate on the issue. I do think that this country's success in negotiating an agreement with Greece on your long-standing dispute is a very positive example for the entire region.

9.

The American analyst Janusz Bugajski has recently assessed that Skopje is a new Russian stronghold in the Balkans and that Kremlin is counting on Macedonia eventually becoming the new Republika Srpska. Your comment on his statement and do you think that the country is currently in the midst of the struggle for influence in the region between the West and Russia?

A: In 2017, during Austria's Chairmanship of the OSCE, I served in Vienna as the Chair of the OSCE Permanent Council. In that position I witnessed the rising tensions between some of the participating States. But I believe that you control your own future and are not pawns in the rivalries of others. I look forward to your country making progress toward your own goals of building a prosperous, tolerant and multi-ethnic democracy.

10.

How do you assess the freedom of the media; few years ago we have been assessed as a captured state, with captured institutions and of course, captured media? Do you see a ray of light and opening up of the media space for critical, objective, independent journalism?

A: For a decade the country did see a substantial decline in media freedom, and faced challenges in media pluralism and combating impunity for crimes against journalists. We have seen progress over the last two years, including a serious effort by law enforcement to investigate new attacks against journalists. Persistent challenges still exist, however, including basic problems such as the small size of the media market and poor working conditions for journalists. I am proud that our Mission is working on a broad series of

activities designed to increase the safety of journalists, and has hosted a workshop on international best practices for possible government support of print media in order to maintain pluralism on the media market. In addition, we are organizing a roundtable discussion to mark the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, on 2 November, with an aim to raise awareness among citizens, media community and relevant institutions about this issue, but also to offer possible solutions how to better counter the present culture of impunity.

11.

The Macedonian Interior Ministry has announced soon implementation of a full vetting of all of its employees. One of the missions of the OSCE is to help Macedonia create community oriented police, in line with the democratic principles and international human rights standards. How do you assess the work of the Macedonian Police which is currently undergoing a reform process; is the vetting a successful tool for professional police officers?

A: Our Mission is working with both the Bureau for Public Security and the Ministry of Internal Affairs to enhance the professionalism of the police service and to ensure compliance with international human rights standards and democratic policing principles. Police reform, by its very nature, is a complex process and our police counterparts have embraced it in a constructive manner.

We are currently in the process of putting together joint working groups with the MoIA to plan the way forward to improve the police human resources, training, and discipline systems, key elements of any police organization committed to hire, promote, and assign officers on the basis of professional merit. Community engagement is another cornerstone of democratic policing, and we are supporting efforts to increase the openness and transparency of the police service, as well as to increase police engagement with the community.

As to vetting, it is an internationally recognized process to help ensure the integrity and accountability of employees in public administration. This is especially relevant to policing given the extensive powers police officers exercise. By helping to ensure the integrity of the police, a fair and transparent vetting process can have the added benefit of increasing public trust in the police as an institution.

12.

One of the goals of your Mission is the advancement of the human rights. You cooperate with the State Commission for Protection against Discrimination and the Ombudsman in the enactment of laws on human rights based on the principle of equal treatment for all. How much does Macedonia respect the human rights and where would you place the country according to this parameter, among which countries?

A: Anti-discrimination and equal treatment are areas in which our Mission has worked for a long time. We hope parliament will pass the new draft Law on the Prevention and Protection from Discrimination, which is fully aligned with international standards. Once passed and implemented, this law, together with the amendments to the Ombudsman Law passed in February, will bring the country closer to advanced democracies with strong independent institutions in the field of anti-discrimination.

Nevertheless, challenges remain: even the best legislation is of little value if it is not effectively enforced, including through the provision of sufficient budgetary resources. The

capacities of the national human rights institutions and equality bodies should be further developed and the underreporting of cases of discrimination, especially in respect to the most vulnerable groups, should be addressed. Here too, our Mission remains committed to supporting the country in achieving these goals.

13.

The Mission also works on prevention of hate speech and naturally, hate crime. Your assessment on whether Macedonia is a country where there is too much hate speech, particularly in a political connotation, ahead of the referendum, post referendum...?

A: Hate crime and hate speech are unacceptable and represent a potential threat to inter-ethnic relations and political reconciliation. The state does not yet collect systematic data on hate incidents, but data from civic organizations indicates that intolerance on ethnic, political, and religious grounds is a significant problem. More needs to be done to deconstruct deeply-rooted stereotypes within the society. One worrying trend is the increase of hate incidents committed due to political affiliation before, during, and sometimes after elections.

The Mission will continue to support national criminal justice agencies, the judiciary and civil society in strengthening their capacity to address hate incidents, provide assistance to the victims of bias or hate, and combat the detrimental effects of intolerance upon society.