



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **Response to the Report by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia**

As delivered by Ambassador Michael Carpenter  
to the Permanent Council, Vienna  
June 22, 2023

Ambassador Braathu, welcome back to the Permanent Council and thank you for your thorough report. The Mission to Serbia remains an indispensable element of this Organization's efforts to promote peace, democracy, and stability in the Western Balkans. Now more than ever, given Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its pervasive consequences for the region, it is critical to effectively reinforce and advance OSCE principles and commitments. Recent tensions in the region only reinforce this point.

As your report describes, the Mission has actively implemented the core pillars of its mandate—especially on the rule of law, human rights, media freedoms, good governance, and the strengthening of capacities for law enforcement. Having a strong partnership with the host government is essential to the Mission's effectiveness, and your team's good collaboration and coordination at the central and local government levels reflect the importance of this constructive relationship. We support the Mission's work with the government of Serbia to advance key reforms, for instance on strengthening judicial independence, as you mentioned, and media reform to align Serbia's legislation and processes with EU directives and OSCE commitments. More remains to be done in key areas such as a free and independent media environment, media access, journalist safety, and combating organized crime and corruption, but the overall trend is encouraging.

I note the final report of ODIHR's election observation mission last August, which concluded that while the April 3, 2022, presidential and National Assembly elections presented diverse political options, a number of shortcomings resulted in an uneven playing field that favored the incumbents. Chief among the shortcomings identified were unbalanced access to media, undue pressure on public sector employees, campaign finance disparities, and misuse of administrative resources. The report issued 26 recommendations aimed at reforming key aspects in the conduct of the elections to bring them in line with OSCE commitments. These recommendations should be a priority area for ongoing engagement with the host government. Serbia's establishment in March of a working group for cooperating with the Mission and ODIHR on electoral reforms is a very good start, and I hope it will begin its work soon.

The Mission's work is taking place despite not having an approved 2023 budget, as well as the accumulating erosion of the Mission's purchasing power and ability to hire and retain qualified staff. It is very alarming, as your report states, that the Mission's alignment rate of salaries for national staff is now at only 67 percent, two-thirds, of the UN salary scale. The loss of eight percent of your post table last year alone through resignations should also be a red flag to all. This is clearly an unsustainable path. I therefore again appeal to all delegations, especially those cynically playing politics with the budget, to set aside their narrow agendas and to move immediately to approve the Chair's 2023 Unified Budget proposal. Otherwise, the work of this Mission, of your Mission, and

that of all Missions, will decline significantly and create severe long-term consequences for this Organization and its vital work in the region.

The United States strongly supports Serbia's aspirations for membership in the European Union, and a democratic, prosperous, and peaceful future for the entire Western Balkans region. We recognize Serbia's important role in this regard and urge Serbia and Kosovo to immediately de-escalate tensions, including by following the three-point plan outlined by our colleagues in the EU. The *status quo* is unsustainable as it hampers the stability and economic prosperity of the Western Balkans and prevents both Kosovo and Serbia from fully integrating into European institutions.

Ambassador Braathu,

The work of your Mission is an invaluable asset to the OSCE in the many ways it helps improve the lives and security of people in Serbia and the region. Your Mission contributes directly to the effectiveness of this Organization on the ground and the advancement of our shared values and commitments. I thank you and your team again for the work you have accomplished in this past year. You have our full support.

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