

**Interview with MIA of Ambassador Clemens Koja,  
Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje  
Date: 6 February 2021**

- 1. Parliament adopted the census law, paving the way for the census to take place in April. Does the legislation ensure quality headcount?**

Thank you for your question. It is encouraging that some of the opposition parties supported the passing of this law, even if there was not full consensus. After almost 20 years, it is important that the country conduct a census, as this will allow governmental institutions to develop and implement policies for the benefit of the citizens based on up-to-date data. It is my understanding that the law was informed by the best practices and standards from various institutions with authority in the field, such as the UN Economic Commission for Europe and Eurostat.

- 2. What are the experiences of OSCE participating States as regards organizing this operation? The opposition in the country demands electronic census.**

We do not have OSCE commitments on conducting census operations, and OSCE participating States use a variety of models. I can tell you that many participating States are planning to conduct census operations this year. These will be particularly challenging operations this year, given the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be important for the government to put clear health and safety protocols in place to ensure the safety and health of field staff and surveyed households. The experience of the early parliamentary elections in July 2020 gives me confidence that established protocols will be followed.

- 3. In the judiciary, the focus is on the cleanup. OSCE has been monitoring politically sensitive court cases. Are we on the right track to restoring trust in the judiciary and efficient rule of law?**

Ever since I arrived here in Skopje, I have been struck by the very low level of public trust in the judicial system reported in opinion surveys. We have seen some steps forward on reform in recent years, including adoption of the Judicial Reform Strategy 2017-2022, which our Mission supported. We have also provided a number of recommendations to address problematic issues we have observed during our extensive monitoring of trials, including the trials of the former Special Prosecutor's Office. We are following current developments, including the adoption late last year by the Judicial Council and the Council of Public Prosecutors of methodologies to evaluate the work of judges and

prosecutors. I trust that proper implementation of these controls will be a step towards restoring trust in the judiciary.

- 4. What is your assessment of the media reforms? A proposal on changing the process for electing and appointing members of the MRT Program Council and the Council of the Agency for Visual and Audiovisual Service in Parliament is a topical issue at the moment. All journalists' organizations issued their comments on the matter.**

The delay in holding parliamentary elections last year due to the COVID-19 hindered implementation of the media reforms. I am glad to see that the government is now returning to this important issue. The public broadcaster's audience share is very small, which indicates that people want to see changes there. It is important to strengthen the public broadcaster's capacity to deliver unbiased information and promote social cohesion through content that caters to the needs of all citizens.

Over the last few years, our Mission has worked intensively to help increase the safety of journalists in this country. Although the media freedom rankings of North Macedonia are improving, we are witnessing a growing number of cases of cyberbullying and online attacks against female journalists, particularly around election time. We plan to continue to work with law enforcement, the judiciary and media as they seek to deal with this threat to the free flow of reliable information that citizens need so badly given all of the misinformation and disinformation they are exposed to, particularly online.

- 5. It's election year as the country is ahead of holding regular local elections. There were recommendations stemming from the previous parliamentary elections, once again there are announcements for a single electoral unit, open lists, etc. Is it acceptable for the electoral legislation to be amended during an election year?**

According to ODIHR, it is advisable for electoral legislation to come into force at least six months ahead of an election, so that institutions can prepare to implement the changes smoothly.

Over the years, ODIHR has provided a significant number of recommendations to improve the election process in North Macedonia. In their final report on last year's early parliamentary elections, the ODIHR Special Election Assessment Mission made clear that there are still a number of issues in the legal framework for elections that need to be addressed.

ODIHR does not recommend a specific electoral model, and OSCE participating States employ a wide range of different electoral models as well as different systems for administering elections. Given the importance of these issues, we strongly support an inclusive process where all stakeholders can discuss their ideas for electoral reform that will strengthen the representation of citizens and thereby the legitimacy of elected officials. We are pleased that the Ministry of Justice has launched a working group on electoral code reform involving political parties and civil society groups with expertise on elections. Both our Mission and ODIHR are participating in this working group.

- 6. Last month, new members of the State Election Commission (SEC) were elected. Their first challenge is to organize and administer the local elections, scheduled to take place in the autumn. Is the SEC headed toward becoming a partisan rather than a professional body?**

The State Election Commission (SEC) has been a long-standing partner of both our Mission and ODIHR. We expect that the new composition of the SEC will carry out their duties in a manner that is fully consistent with existing legislation, rules and procedures, including the Oath of Office the members have signed. It is worth to mention that the SEC is not just the seven-member commission. It also includes the administrative staff, who have shown high levels of professionalism and dedication over the years.

- 7. 2020 was marked by the coronavirus pandemic, which caused serious health and economic consequences worldwide. What kind of activities the OSCE is conducting to help the country handle the COVID pandemic that are in line with the OSCE Mission's mandate?**

Already last spring, we donated personal protective equipment to the government for medical workers, the police, and other first responders. We also donated a car to the Tetovo branch of the Red Cross to allow them to provide support to vulnerable citizens living in remote areas, and donated safety kits for journalists so they could continue their important work informing the public during the pandemic.

We also created an initiative to provide small grants to civil society organizations to help them to help people in need and underserved groups of citizens, including people with disabilities, youth and the elderly, smaller communities, survivors of domestic violence and many others. In total, we provided more than 150.000

Euros in grants to 11 organizations, which were selected from over 110 applicants through a competitive process.

As you know, our Mission has long supported reform and professionalization of both law enforcement and the judiciary. COVID-19 created significant challenges for both. In addition to providing protective equipment for the police, we delivered stress management training to police officers and member of the Chamber of Private Security Companies, whose members provide security of critical infrastructure. We also supported the national Association of Judges to develop protocols for safely holding trials during the pandemic, and supported efforts to digitalize the court system.

Last but not least, we supported the drafting of an analysis of the impact of the pandemic on men and women, which showed that the pandemic had a disproportionately negative effect on women. Having recognized this challenge during the initial stage of the crisis, we supported groups that operate helplines to report cases of domestic violence.

- 8. The current Swedish Chairpersonship pointed out gender equality in all aspects of the work of the organization and inclusion of the civil society as one of the top priorities. The Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde stressed that achieving comprehensive security throughout the region requires meaningful inclusion and empowerment of women. How do we fare in this regard?**

In my recent blog post in the magazine “Face-to-Face”, I noted that gender equality is an essential aspect for any country’s stability and security. I think that it is crucial for the country to commit to ending gender-based violence. Bearing this in mind, we welcome the recent adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. We were glad to see that the law gained cross-party support, and are proud to have contributed to the process of drafting this important piece of legislation.

Our Mission is strongly committed to supporting women’s empowerment and their increased participation in decision-making. In 2017, we launched a Mentoring Programme for Women in Police, and last year created a similar program for women working throughout the public administration. We believe these programmes help the participants to grow professionally and prepare them to take on more senior, decision-making roles in the administration.

- 9. The draft-concept on reforms in the elementary education is a topical issue. What is your opinion?**

The education system is a reflection of society and demands of the labour market. This is one reason why it is necessary for the education system to be frequently re-examined. The results of the Programme for International Student Assessment both in 2015 and in 2018 show that the education system needs to place a stronger emphasis on enhancing competencies of graduates. This is why, I see development of a new Concept for Primary Education as a practical step towards boosting education outcomes.

- 10. During your tenure in the country, you witnessed key moments, including the name referendum, becoming full-fledged NATO member, being approved by EU leaders to start negotiations, and also Bulgaria’s veto to the opening of negotiations. Where do you see the future of the country?**

Since my arrival in September 2018, the country has made considerable progress in implementing its ambitious reform agenda. I am proud that our Mission has supported reforms in key areas, such as the rule of law, as well as the fight against a variety of transnational threats. I appreciate the government’s focus on

improving relations with your neighbours, which has contributed to security in the region.

Going forward, I would encourage the country to continue on its reform path to further improve its track record in areas such as combating corruption, promoting public administration reform, and fighting organized crime, all the while fostering a strong rule of law and independence of the judiciary.

**11. North Macedonia at the December OSCE Ministerial Meeting in Tirana was awarded the OSCE 2023 Chairpersonship. What does it mean for North Macedonia given your years-long experience as a diplomat and your experience as an Austria's ambassador to the OSCE during the Austrian OSCE Chairpersonship?**

First of all, let me once more congratulate North Macedonia for being chosen to chair the OSCE in 2023. The country's bid to chair the organization demonstrates a commitment to effective multilateralism, the comprehensive and the co-operative security approach of the OSCE. Speaking from personal experience, I must say that chairing our organization is not an easy task as it requires a strong expert team, patience, stamina, and political determination. But I am confident that the country, which has already started to prepare for 2023, will provide strong leadership for the organization. And of course, North Macedonia starts with an advantage, in that you know at first hand the work of OSCE missions, such as ours, in supporting security and reform processes.