



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Report by the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Clemens Koja

As delivered by Chargé d’Affaires Courtney Austrian
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
May 27, 2021

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The United States welcomes back Head of Mission Koja to the Permanent Council. Thank you, Ambassador, for your thorough report. We also appreciated the opportunity to hear from you yesterday during the informal briefing.

Ambassador Koja, your leadership ensured work continued across all program areas while maintaining the safety of Mission staff in the face of the pandemic. We thank you and your team for your commitment in this challenging operating environment and welcome your thoughts on upcoming challenges and changes given the pace of North Macedonia’s vaccination campaign.

We congratulate North Macedonia for its administration of the July 15, 2020 Parliamentary elections—despite the delay caused by the pandemic—and the formation of a new coalition government led by Prime Minister Zoran Zaev on August 30, 2020.

ODIHR concluded the elections were administered effectively, and election day proceeded smoothly. We know the State Electoral Commission’s successful administration of the election was in no small part due to your team’s steadfast assistance and support.

As we look ahead, one important question is the status of unresolved issues with the electoral law and process which remain from the substantial revisions to the Electoral Code and regulations enacted during the *State of Emergency*. Will the outstanding ODIHR recommendations in fact be addressed by Parliament before the October 2021 elections, and what can the Mission do to assist that process?

Despite the operating challenges of the past year, you completed 70 percent of the tasks making up the Mission’s Gender Action Plan, which is evidence of your team’s impressive work in promoting and supporting greater gender equality in North Macedonia. As your report ably recounts, the Mission is engaged in a range of other valuable activities that further the OSCE’s work to promote good governance, media freedom, rule of law, and non-discrimination; decentralize government services; and improve judicial capacity and transparency. We particularly commend the Mission’s efforts on trial monitoring, where your presence in courtrooms, especially in high-profile cases, promotes transparency and holds judicial actors to the highest standards. We support the progress made by the government with your support in these and related areas, for example with the adoption of the *National Anti-Corruption Strategy* in April 2021.

We note with interest the Mission's activities on key transboundary challenges that are critical to securing peace, prosperity, and security in the Balkan region—such as trafficking in persons and drugs, combating violent extremism, and combating corruption. To support these efforts, the United States contributed to multiple supplementary extra-budgetary projects, including one to combat transnational organized crime through improved cooperation on asset seizure. We have also recently contributed €2,000,000 to a project to Decrease the Risk of Weapon Proliferation and Misuse of Small Arms and Light Weapons.

We reaffirm the United States remains a close partner to the people and government of North Macedonia and share the goal of a stable and prosperous future for the country—one in which North Macedonia will be fully integrated in Euro-Atlantic institutions as a multi-ethnic democracy. We reiterate our support for North Macedonia to begin its EU accession negotiations and participate in its first *Intergovernmental Conference* as soon as possible. We note, along with the OSCE Mission, the commitment of the government to a reform agenda irrespective of the gradual EU accession progress.

Ambassador Koja, we thank you again for your leadership during this very challenging time, and your Mission's continued outstanding work. You continue to have our full support in carrying out your critical mission.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

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