



United States Mission to the OSCE
Response to Report by
Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje,
Ambassador Nina Suomalainen

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 17, 2015

The United States welcomes Ambassador Suomalainen to the Permanent Council in her new capacity and thanks her for a comprehensive and detailed report.

Ambassador Suomalainen, congratulations on your selection to lead the OSCE Mission to Skopje during a particularly difficult time in the country's development. We enthusiastically support your selection and look forward to working with you.

We also thank Marianne Berezcz for her leadership during the so-called "interregnum".

As Secretary of State Kerry noted on Macedonia's Independence Day, the "United States is proud to be Macedonia's friend and partner, and we remain committed to helping Macedonia proceed along the path to Euro-Atlantic integration by strengthening rule of law, promoting media freedom, and building strong democratic foundations for an inclusive, multi-ethnic society." The OSCE Mission to Skopje continues to play a crucial role in helping Macedonia reach these goals, and we strongly support its efforts, including the monitoring work of its field-deployed contingent; its robust activities to promote rule of law, public administration reform, and implementation of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, and its monitoring of the security situation, especially in light of the migrant and refugee crisis.

We commend Macedonia's leaders for reaching agreement in July to resolve the political crisis, an agreement which serves the best interests of the people of Macedonia. The OSCE Mission in Skopje played a vital role during the preceding crisis by facilitating dialogue, coordinating visits by OSCE representatives and delegations, and helping Macedonia reach constructive solutions.

We applaud the first steps toward implementing the July 15 agreement, including the opposition's return to Parliament on September 1 and the agreement to establish a Special Prosecutor on September 15. The United States, along with the OSCE and other partners, continues to support full implementation of the agreement.

Much difficult work remains. With parliamentary elections scheduled to take place in just seven months, we strongly urge Macedonian leaders to call on the various OSCE institutions for expertise and support. The OSCE is uniquely positioned to support Macedonia's leaders and people in the election, but the time to request assistance is now. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the

Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, the Special Representative on the Western Balkans, and the OSCE Field Mission in Skopje, all stand ready to provide critical assistance, and we encourage Macedonia's leaders to seek out such support.

We anticipate that ODIHR will play a significant role in ensuring that the parliamentary elections scheduled in April 2016 live up to OSCE standards. We again urge Macedonia's leaders to fully adopt the electoral reforms outlined in ODIHR's July 2014 report to address deficiencies related to media bias, inadequate separation of political party and state activities, and voter intimidation. Steps must be taken to protect the integrity of all voting rights, including those of the Roma and ethnic Turk minority communities. It is difficult to overstate the importance of these and other confidence-building steps for the upcoming electoral process.

Demonstrating real progress on planned reforms – such as strengthening the rule of law, depoliticizing the public administration, improving respect for freedom of expression, and creating a level playing field for elections – is crucial to furthering Macedonia's prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Ambassador Suomalainen, the United States welcomes your frankness on the absence of tangible progress in electoral reform, including the lack of consensus on which reforms to address following the June 2 and July 15 agreements. Clearly, this process will not be easy. Yet, we encourage you and your Mission to continue engaging in an effort to support consensus and real progress.

We recognize the Mission's progress in streamlining its programs and retaining focus on its three priorities: (1) supporting further Ohrid Framework Agreement implementation, (2) advancing constructive inter-ethnic relations, and (3) early warning and security. The United States appreciates the efficiency gains and effective use of limited resources by the Mission. We also recognize that the current reality on the ground in Macedonia limits the Mission's ability to make incremental budget reductions.

Ambassador Suomalainen, thank you again for your commitment to the OSCE's work and for accepting the challenge to lead the Mission to Skopje. We sincerely appreciate the tremendous work and dedication of you and your team, and look forward to supporting your efforts in the crucial months ahead.

Thank you for continuing to keep us apprised, both of events in Macedonia and of ways that the OSCE toolbox can be deployed in support of a strong, democratic future for Macedonia.

In closing, I would like to reiterate Secretary Kerry's pledge that the United States will continue working together with the people of Macedonia toward a secure and prosperous future as a multi-ethnic democracy fully integrated in Euro-Atlantic institutions. The United States has supported Macedonia's development and transition over the last 24 years, and we celebrate all that the people of Macedonia have achieved since independence.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.