



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to the Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje

As delivered by Deputy Permanent Representative Kate Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 14, 2016

The United States welcomes Ambassador Suomalainen back to the Permanent Council. Thank you, Ambassador, for your excellent report on the activities of the OSCE Mission to Skopje.

The United States has been proud to work alongside the European Union with all of the political parties in Macedonia in an attempt to overcome the current political crisis. We welcome ongoing efforts to implement the Przino Agreement, which represents Macedonia's best path forward out of its political crisis. While some progress has been made on implementation of certain elements of the Agreement, the time has come to complete the work and set Macedonia on a course for free and fair elections. Failure to complete this work has caused elections to be postponed twice and have prolonged the political crisis. Following meetings this week in Skopje with all four major party leaders, the United States is hopeful that in the coming days, the parties' negotiating teams can work together to chart a course toward elections. Doing so will take political will and courage by all sides. We call on Macedonia's political parties to redouble their efforts to reach agreement and implement Przino and put Macedonia back on the Euro-Atlantic path.

Ambassador Suomalainen, as noted in your report, the OSCE Mission to Skopje has been actively involved in supporting your host country's preparations for elections. Despite setbacks and postponements, your Mission has continued to provide technical support to the State Election Commission on voter registration and the voter list review, out-of-country voting, amendments to the Electoral Code, and implementation of reforms recommended by the 2014 final report by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). The work of your Mission on these issues is vital and we wholeheartedly support your efforts.

Macedonia's current political crisis was triggered by allegations of abuse of authority and possible criminal behavior, as well as allegations of executive interference in judicial and prosecutorial matters. These allegations underscored the crucial importance of Macedonia strengthening its justice system and the rule of law in order to achieve its Euro-Atlantic objectives of becoming a member of the EU and NATO. In recognition of this, the leaders of Macedonia's four largest political parties agreed to create, and Parliament unanimously voted to support, a new independent institution – the Office of the Special Prosecutor (SPO). Given the SPO's critical role in establishing legal accountability, the United States is actively supporting the Office of the Special Prosecutor with training and assistance, just as we have assisted Macedonia's court system, public prosecutor, and police over the past 25 years since the country became independent. During the past fifteen years alone, the U.S. government

has contributed more than \$55 million to help develop the capacity of Macedonia's courts, judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers, and police to fulfill their mandates professionally, transparently, efficiently, and with credibility. More than 600 judges, 300 public prosecutors, 150 defense lawyers, and over 2,000 law enforcement officers have benefited from these efforts. Despite these efforts, the rule of law remains under threat in Macedonia. Political leaders have attempted to interfere with the Special Prosecutor's Office and compromise its independence. These actions have slowed efforts to bring much-needed accountability for the wiretapping scandal and have left a cloud of uncertainty around the status of the pardons related to the scandal.

In support of Macedonia's goals to strengthen the judicial system and the rule of law, we are pleased that the OSCE Mission's Rule of Law Unit continues its important work to further develop Macedonia's capacity for evidence gathering, prosecution-led investigation, cross-examination, and providing active defense in trials. Ambassador Suomalainen, we encourage you to maintain this focus on the rule of law, including ongoing trial monitoring, supporting the package of amendments that would help to ensure fair trials, and monitoring and reporting on the Special Prosecutor's current trial cases.

Ambassador Suomalainen, within the OSCE, you have been a recognized leader in demonstrating how our Organization can respond effectively to the migration and refugee crisis. Under your leadership, the OSCE Mission to Skopje reacted quickly to the crisis by deploying monitoring teams, providing timely reports, developing projects and training for frontline social workers to combat trafficking, supporting lawyers and legal aid groups, and bringing together government officials, civil society, and international organizations to better coordinate responses. We have taken note of your call for the Mission to provide additional support to Macedonia on border management, building the technical expertise of police officers and frontline workers, and combating trafficking in human beings. The United States agrees that these are priorities for your Mission, and we encourage you to continue working closely with local partners, national authorities, and the international community to provide that assistance. You have our full support.

In closing, let me emphasize 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. Our engagement, as demonstrated by the over \$750 million in U.S. assistance provided to Macedonia since 1991, reflects the United States' deep commitment to the rule of law and to helping the people of Macedonia resolve the current crisis, develop strong democratic institutions, and move forward toward membership in the EU and NATO. That commitment remains firm.

Ambassador Suomalainen, thanks again to you and your team for your tremendous work.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.