



OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF MISSION

Press and Public Information Unit

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Interview with Ambassador Hans Ola Ursatad, Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

1. OSCE has been monitoring the situation in the Sandzak region over the years. How would you assess the current situation in the region and what is the aim of your upcoming visit?

Ever since the OSCE Mission to Serbia was established in 2001, it has been carrying out activities in South-western Serbia in line with our mandate to work throughout Serbia. In May we opened a training facility in Novi Pazar in order to aid us in our delivery of services to the region and to be in a position to gain a better understanding of this unique region through closer communication with the local leaders, civil society and citizens. Currently two project assistants are working out of the training facility, and later this month a third colleague will take up the post as project manager to coordinate activities and to represent the OSCE Mission in the region.

The fields in which we aim to intensify our activities in the region are broad: media, rule of law, anti-trafficking, youth initiative, civil society and law enforcement—in short, many of the same areas we work on in the rest of your country. By working closely with the local municipal institutions and organizations we will develop more specific activities designed to address the most important issues for the people in Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Prijepolje, Nova Varos and Proboj. The Mission appreciates that each of these municipalities has different challenges in the realms of minorities, religious communities, border issues, corruption, education and media, but we do not want to make broad generalizations for a region which holds such impressive diversity.

I am encouraged by the fact that now two Ministers and eight MPs in the Republican Parliament are from this region, as they are in positions to bring knowledge of the region's issues to the policy dialogue taking place in Belgrade, and generally promote special regional interests and issues.

My upcoming visit to the region is part of my Mission's effort to promote the values that the OSCE stands for – namely tolerance, respect for human rights and rule of law and

democratic governance. Currently the municipality of Prijepolje is preparing for a repeat round of local elections, as the elected political parties were not able to agree on the formation of a government within the legal timeline. I want to communicate to the people of Prijepolje that I see the process of negotiation and compromise as healthy and constructive, as it raises the level of debate on issues of importance. I applaud the leaders for respecting the democratic process, and I also applaud them for their continued determination to form a local government which includes representatives from both the Serbian and the Bosniak communities – Prijepolje has long been a positive example of a local government which intentionally includes both major ethnic groups into its ruling bodies. This is, of course, very important. Furthermore, the local election in Prijepolje in May was open and peaceful, and we are confident that the upcoming election will be conducted equally well.

2. You stated last year that the OSCE will devote more attention to the Sandzak region, especially to improving the work of the judiciary and the police. Has any progress been made in these fields, is the Serbian Government working enough to improve these areas? It seems that the ethnic composition of staff employed in judiciary and police does not correspond to the situation in the field.

The positive example of South Serbia, where joint efforts by the Serbian Government and the OSCE brought tangible results, assures us that the progress achieved in South-western Serbia so far in the realms of judiciary and police reform are a product of shared values and cooperation, not only between central and local institutions, but also jointly with the citizens in the region. They are the ones who should have ownership of this process, and the OSCE Mission stands ready to assist them as they move forward.

In the realm of policing, reform must be both top-down and bottom-up. The OSCE Mission to Serbia is working closely with the MoI as it strategically moves closer to European standards for policing, and we hope to work closely with the local level authorities to build greater confidence and understanding between the police and the citizens.

Just as in the three South Serbia municipalities, we have also held successful training events in Novi Pazar for police and judiciary staff in combating trafficking and organised crime. In South Serbia the work over time resulted in a higher level of professionalism, accountability and competence, and accordingly, employment of staff with the skills needed to serve their local communities. We hope to work with all concerned to achieve the same goal in this region. The engagement of the Government of Serbia is of crucial importance for achieving the final goal - improvement of life for all citizens in South-western Serbia.

3. During the May pre-electoral campaign the OSCE has undoubtedly contributed to lowering tensions between SDA and SDP and maintaining the peaceful nature of the pre-electoral campaign. Although the division between these two parties still

exists, it seems that currently the conflict in the Islamic community is in the limelight. Can the OSCE do something about it?

I have noted with concern both the political and religious divisions in the region. We want to help calm tensions and encourage dialogue. The Code of Conduct signing was an effort by the local leaders to show the citizens of Novi Pazar that they can put their differences aside to show their voters that their first responsibility is to the citizens, to conduct an open and fair election. I am proud the Mission played a central role in this effort.

The OSCE Mission encourages the leaders of Serbia's Islamic Community to make similar efforts for their followers, to engage in dialogue to resolve differences within the Community.

4. Economically speaking, Sandzak is still behind the rest of the country. Without the economic there is no political independence. How should we get there? The Sandzak municipalities obviously cannot do very much on their own to strengthen the economy.

I would have to politely disagree that the local authorities and citizens cannot do very much to strengthen their own economy. The aim of the OSCE Mission to Serbia is to encourage co-operation at the local and regional levels by helping to create a sound competitive environment for young entrepreneurs and small- and medium-sized enterprises. By carrying out our mandate we will contribute to creating an environment equipped to support and protect a healthy economy. By strengthening the democratic institutions, the judiciary, fighting corruption, organized crime and trafficking, and aiding Serbia to bring European standards to policing, we help create a more attractive investment climate which can bring jobs and growth. We recently supported a project designed to raise awareness of corruption among youth in Novi Pazar, which included several public discussions on this topic. Such events encourage young people to get involved in their community, to be aware of the problems and make an effort to do what they can to fight corruption, one of the main factors hampering economic development and the creation of new jobs. In short, there is a lot of potential in Southwest Serbia and we have to work together to bring about greater development and a prosperous future for this region.