



EUROPEAN UNION

OSCE Permanent Council No. 1306 Vienna, 18 March 2021

EU Statement in Response to the Head of the OSCE Mission in Serbia, Ambassador Braathu

The European Union welcomes Ambassador Braathu in his new capacity as Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia to the Permanent Council. We thank him for the report on the Mission's activities over the past year.

We highly value the significant support the Mission provides to Serbia, its fruitful cooperation with the host country and its efforts to develop partnerships with all relevant stakeholders, as well as the work done to promote domestic ownership and regional cooperation.

We commend the targeted efforts of the Mission, particularly under the challenging circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, to monitor the impact of restrictive measures on human rights, including freedom of expression and the rule of law, together with its efforts to provide focused assistance to the most vulnerable groups and contribute to tailored projects, such as providing extra educational support to Roma children and youth and the on-line classes of Serbian as a non-native language.

We note ODIHR's assessment of last year's parliamentary elections, which concluded that elections had been conducted efficiently overall, with respect for fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Yet, ODIHR also raised concerns regarding the dominance of the ruling party, including in the media. We strongly encourage the host country to address all relevant ODIHR recommendations for the improvement of the electoral legislation, through inclusive dialogue well ahead of the next elections. In this context, we also strongly encourage genuine and meaningful engagement of all stakeholders in the inter-party dialogue facilitated by the European Parliament.

At the same time, we take positive note of the election of the highest ever number of women MPs and the entry of four lists of persons belonging to national minorities in the National Assembly.

We note the resumption of the process for the necessary constitutional amendments aiming at the independence, accountability and efficiency of the judiciary. We hope that this will be promptly concluded and that the outcome will meet high international standards. We commend the Mission's focus on this highly important issue.

We particularly appreciate the Mission's activities aimed at improving the media environment in Serbia and we support its continued focus on freedom of expression, media literacy and safety of journalists. We welcome the adoption of the Action Plan for the implementation of the new Media Strategy and we commend the Mission for its valuable contribution. We encourage the host country to take all necessary measures for the meaningful implementation of these strategic documents and to improve media freedom and the safety of journalists, in particular in the context of attacks on journalists.

We appreciate the Mission's work in monitoring war crimes proceedings, in the framework of the relevant EU-funded project. We underline the need to intensify reform efforts, to fight impunity for war crimes and ensure the victim's rights and their access to justice without discrimination. We stress the importance of tackling war crimes, including by resolving conflicts of jurisdiction. We reiterate that due attention to the fate of missing persons, who disappeared in the 1990s conflicts, should be maintained. We stress the importance of regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations as a prerequisite for stability, reconciliation and a climate conducive to addressing open bilateral issues and overcoming legacies of the past.

We acknowledge the Serbian Government's efforts to fight corruption and organised crime, including by adopting the necessary relevant legislation, and underline the need for their effective implementation to lead to meaningful results. We highly appreciate the Mission's assistance in promoting international and regional cooperation in combating organised crime and other transnational threats.

We underline that Serbia needs to continue to pay particular attention to full respect for fundamental rights, including the protection of the most vulnerable groups, as well as the non-discriminatory treatment of persons belonging to national minorities throughout Serbia, in line with the international standards and bilateral agreements. This is particularly important in the areas of education and the right to study in their mother tongue, use of minority languages, and access to media and religious services in minority languages and representation in public administration and representative bodies. The unpoliticised and proper functioning of the National Minority Councils, as foreseen in their mandates, remains important for their activity and purpose they serve and should continue to be closely monitored by the HCNM. Cases of hate speech, intimidation and attacks should be addressed promptly and firmly. We reiterate our call for effective implementation of the relevant strategic documents. We commend the Mission's contribution and its continuous engagement with organisations representing persons belonging to national minorities.

We reiterate the EU's unequivocal support to Serbia's European perspective and its readiness to assist Serbia in advancing its reform agenda and in tackling the remaining challenges. We welcome the overall progress made so far, and we encourage further and more focused efforts on the effective implementation of reforms in the identified key areas.

We recall that progress in the EU-facilitated dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, is a key element for both in order to advance on their respective European paths, in line with the European perspective of the region. We welcome the resumption of the dialogue and we urge both sides to redouble their efforts, with the support of EU Special Representative Miroslav Lajcak, to engage constructively in this process in order to reach a comprehensive legally binding normalisation agreement.

Finally, we wish you Ambassador Braathu and your team every success in the coming year.

The Candidate Countries REPUBLIC of NORTH MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, and the EFTA countries ICELAND and LIECHTENSTEIN, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE and GEORGIA align themselves with this statement.

* Republic of North Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.