

OSCE Head of Mission to Serbia: UK response

Thank you Chair

Ambassador Braathu, welcome back to the Permanent Council in your new role as Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia, and thanks to you and your team for your detailed report.

It is clear that the Mission has continued to provide valuable assistance to Serbia in spite of the challenges posed by the global pandemic. These extraordinary times saw the postponement of last year's April elections in Serbia and we are grateful to the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) for sending a Special Election Assessment Mission for the re-scheduled elections on 21 June.

We note that the Serbian Government has re-established the Working Group to address ODIHR's recommendations. We welcome that both the Mission and ODIHR stand ready to support efforts to implement these important recommendations ahead of elections in 2022.

Today, I would like to focus on three areas covered in your Report – media freedom; minority communities; and combatting serious and organised crime.

Media Freedom is essential for democracy to function effectively. It is vital that journalists can carry out their work free of threats or physical attacks. We are grateful to the Mission for its commitment and expertise as an honest broker in promoting the development of a healthier media environment in Serbia. We welcome your continued support to implement the 2020 Media Strategy, based on the Action Plan agreed.

Without implementation, a strategy means little. We strongly support the Mission's continued advisory and facilitation role with the Permanent Working Group on the Safety of Journalists and your work to analyse the Criminal Code, following which the Republic Public Prosecutor introduced a 24 hour deadline for launching investigations into cases of attacks on journalists.

On national minorities – the Mission is well placed to provide expertise and assistance, and we attach great value to your field offices in south and south west Serbia and their work at the local level. One of the achievements of this reporting period has been your work with the Albanian National Minority Council and Ministry in providing primary school textbooks in the Albanian language. We also highlight your work in facilitating dialogue between south Serbia and central institutions with respect to the further integration of national minorities, as well as through encouraging their participation in the upcoming population census.

Serious and organised crime and corruption blight communities and ruin lives. It should be a priority for every national government to protect its citizens

and to work to disrupt, and bring to justice, the criminals involved. We welcome the Serbian government's stated commitment to address the problems that exist, and we recognise the scale of the challenge ahead.

The Mission plays a valuable role here – providing expertise and support, building the capacity of the police, including on tackling corruption, cyber-crime, money laundering, and on identifying early signs of radicalisation that can lead to terrorism. We particularly highlight your work with the Serbian Task Force on Combating Human Trafficking with counterparts from Hungary and North Macedonia that led to the arrest and conviction of 14 suspects.

I extend the UK's appreciation also for your work on gender that underpins all that you do. We particularly highlight your publication on "Sexual harassment in Serbia", and your work on the Mission's documentary "Language and Reality" that shines a spotlight on the part that language plays in creating attitudes, including towards women and men.

In closing, I underline the UK's support, with international partners, for the EU-facilitated Dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo – working towards a comprehensive and sustainable normalisation agreement that benefits the people of both countries.

Thanks again to you, Ambassador Braathu, for the Mission's report, and please also convey our thanks to your team.