

OSCE Mission to Skopje: UK statement

Thank you Mr Chair

Welcome back to the Permanent Council Ambassador Koja and thank you for the comprehensive Report on the Mission's activities. We also appreciate that the Executive Director of the Council of Media Ethics joined your informal briefing to participating States yesterday.

I would like to start by commending the Mission and its staff for their continued support to the Republic of North Macedonia and to the Government's reform agenda. Your report includes some notable highlights across the Mission's activities, including in support of new legislation and in the Mission's essential role in early warning.

Whilst the global pandemic clearly affected some of the Mission's planned activities, you turned your focus to assisting the response to the crisis, including through support to the most vulnerable people, and to preventing an increase in domestic violence. We would appreciate hearing more about the impact of these Mission activities, and particularly in relation to preventing domestic violence, an area where many countries saw a shocking increase during periods of lockdown.

We also welcome the support you provided to the State Electoral Commission to prepare for safe elections when they took place on 15 July. We note that some of ODIHR's previous recommendations were partially implemented with the amendments to the Electoral Code on 15 February, but that several long-standing recommendations still need to be addressed. The continued presence of and support from ODIHR and international partners will be key for electoral reform in the months and years to come. The cyber-attack on election day that took part of the State Electoral Commission's website offline has highlighted the need for enhanced cybersecurity measures for all key institutions.

On transnational threats your report notes that after nearly two years of strategic engagement, the Mission is now well positioned to assist the country in combating organised crime and transnational threats. As it looks increasingly likely that the COVID-19 pandemic has had and will have a notable impact on serious organised crime, cybercrime and violent extremism, we look forward to hearing more on this in your next Report.

Ambassador Koja, following the Mission's introduction of mainstreaming a gender perspective into its programmatic work in 2019, we welcome your development of a Gender Action Plan for 2020 and 2021, and the corresponding Annual Activity Plan. Your focus on Gender Equality is commendable, including the Mission's assistance in mainstreaming a gender perspective into Parliament's work, increasing sensitivity and awareness among police and judiciary to gender-based violence, and impact assessments on the implementation of the Law on Equal Opportunities of Women and Men that will serve as a basis for a new Law on Gender Equality. Your new outreach approach

to debunk rumours and prejudices on grounds of gender, that reached more than one million people through on-line activities, is also encouraging.

We underline the important contribution that young people can make to decision-making and development of effective policies, and welcome the adoption of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies in January this year. Young people have the ability to make a real difference in bridging ethnic divides. And, ensuring that all children – from primary through to secondary school – receive an education that is based on inclusivity and is non-discriminatory is essential to providing a firm foundation for a cohesive society. The new Law for Primary Education that has inclusivity amongst its eight principles is a welcome step. We look forward to hearing more on the implementation of these laws in your next Report.

Finally, we support your sustained focus on safety of journalists. We are concerned about the growing trend in cyber-bullying and verbal abuse and appreciate that you are taking steps to address this issue. Journalists must be able to operate without fear of threats or acts of violence.

Thank you Ambassador Koja for joining us today and please pass on our appreciation to your team.