

Interview with Ambassador Brian Aggeler Head of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina

Dnevni avaz

13 February 2024

[Šef Misije OSCE-a Brajan Ageler za "Avaz": Fabricirane prijetnje omogućavaju cvjetanje korupcije](#)

Direct and concrete messages BiH authorities received last week from American and European officials (James O'Brian and Mircea Geoana). Much has been said about the current political atmosphere. How do you perceive it?

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the prevailing political landscape continues to revolve around leaders who, with well-established tactics, perpetuate instability, resort to divisive, confrontational and harsh rhetoric to strengthen their own authority. This calculated approach fosters an environment characterized by heightened ethnic tensions, widespread political disunity, and conflicting agendas that don't address the real needs of the people.

Inter-ethnic distrust frequently steers the course of political decisions, obstructing the governments in their duties to address the needs and aspirations of citizens beyond ethnic lines. These concerns, shared by all the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina regardless of their ethnic background — such as a worsening security situation, including an alarming rise in gender-based violence, unemployment, corruption, and the absence of the rule of law — remain unaddressed.

The shrinking of civic space, especially in the Republika Srpska with the recent re-criminalization of defamation and the pending so-called “foreign agents” law that would restrict the work of civil society organizations, compounds these undemocratic shifts. In this atmosphere, independent journalists and human rights defenders regularly face unacceptable and oppressive intimidation and pressure, hindering their ability to play their vital role in a free society.

While power is currently concentrated in political parties, for genuine democracy to thrive the real political power must lie in institutions. Regular visits by senior American and European officials remind the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina that the international community is firmly behind them on this path.

Corruption is still a cancer and, it seems, will remain so for a long time. Have we moved beyond the deadlock on this issue? There is also the biggest post-war affair "Respirators", which is the most talked about.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is the worst-ranked state in the region according to Transparency International's recently published corruption perception index, and it is the second worst on the entire European continent. This should concern every citizen and every elected and appointed official must be held accountable.

The tactics of fabricated threats of separations, conflicts and made-up crises have served as distractions from citizens' genuine concerns, allowing corruption to bloom. Politicians have been entrusted by citizens to ensure welfare and progress, and, instead, they preserve a climate where corruption prospers unhindered and without impunity.

It is high time that Bosnia and Herzegovina seriously address corruption. While war is universally recognized as devastating to nations and individuals, corruption possesses similarly destructive traits. It undermines the country's foundations and jeopardizes its future, while threatening lives and driving widespread emigration.

In addition to assisting local authorities in instituting a robust regulatory and institutional framework to detect, prevent, and process corruption, in the forthcoming period, the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina will launch a country-wide public campaign, aimed at empowering and mobilizing citizens to identify and report corruption. This initiative marks another key step in advancing a stance of zero tolerance towards corruption.

Local elections await Bosnia and Herzegovina this year. How important is it for citizens to see the application of at least technical changes to the Election Law for these elections?

It is disappointing to note that there has been no progress in delivering crucial amendments to the BiH Election Law, despite years of negotiations and numerous rounds of discussions. This neglect is especially discouraging given the expectations of citizens, as revealed in the Mission's survey on public perceptions of elections in BiH, where 60% of respondents emphasized the necessity of amending the Election Law to enhance integrity, transparency, and fairness of elections in the country. The citizens of BiH clearly desire these significant changes, yet the authorities entrusted with this task have regrettably failed to fulfill their obligation to engage in electoral reform.

The perception of the electoral process as prone to fraud discourages citizens from exercising their democratic rights and participating in elections.

The OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina calls upon the relevant authorities to finally guarantee the integrity and transparency of the 2024 Local Elections in order to minimize the potential for electoral fraud. It is the responsibility of the authorities to rebuild citizens' trust in the integrity of the electoral process. This includes the consistent application of procedural safeguards, the secrecy of the vote, and all other measures aimed at preventing electoral corruption, fraud, and irregularities.

We continue to advocate for an inclusive, thorough, and transparent review of electoral legislation, with the foremost objective of enhancing election integrity and protecting the democratic rights of citizens. There is no secret about what is needed – concrete recommendations have been provided by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Venice Commission, and the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO).

Attacks on returnees are becoming more frequent. How did we go back so many steps in the matter of coexistence and what needs to be done?

I cannot overemphasize this: safety and security are fundamental preconditions for building a stable and prosperous society. It is imperative that everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of background, feels accepted, safe and valued. Without this foundation all other efforts towards progress are futile. While not every incident can be thwarted, institutions must respond consistently and effectively, irrespective of the background of the victim. Regrettably, this is not what the Mission observes.

The propagation of divisive rhetoric by certain officials in BiH often provokes, as we have too often witnessed, an escalation in incidents targeting ethnic minorities and the proliferation of hate speech. Incendiary and irresponsible statements in the service of short-term political gain exacerbate the already delicate inter-ethnic relations in the country. Our Mission strongly condemns any act, verbal or physical, with the potential to incite conflict, thereby jeopardizing peace and security.

We urge authorities to prioritize dialogue over irresponsible public confrontations, to promote community engagement instead of spreading fear, and to invest in quality education that promotes inclusivity and diversity rather than ethnically-colored and polarized curricula.

The OSCE Mission to BiH will remain steadfast in our commitment to supporting all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina in their pursuit of dignity and prosperity, and we urge all relevant actors to do the same.

Does BiH need a new law on preventing of money laundering and terrorist financing?

Yes. This is an area critical for advancing efforts of Bosnia and Herzegovina to address organized crime, terrorism and corruption. Over the past several years now, we have been investing significant resources in supporting Council of Ministers Working Groups tasked with developing key policy and legal documents. Our work has brought results and a number of them have been adopted, including: the amendment to the National Risk Assessment on Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing for the period 2022-2024 and the Action Plan, the 2021-2026 Strategy for Preventing and Combating Terrorism, the Risk Assessment of Organized Crime, and the Strategy for Combating Organized Crime.

I would like to stress that all these documents were developed with a high level of commitment by a large number of institutions from all levels of government with exemplary leadership from the BiH Ministry of Security. However, even though the Working Group that was tasked with drafting the new Law on Preventing Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing was equally productive and constructive in reaching solutions and compromises that resulted in a draft Law largely aligned with Financial Action Task Force (FATF) recommendations, it seems we are witnessing a lack of political will to adopt the Law at the present moment.

A failure of BiH to adopt this Law brings a real risk of the country's once again being placed on the "grey list" of international entities overseeing efforts against money laundering and terrorist financing (incl. FATF and the EU), which might be a result of this week's on-site visit of the Council of Europe's Moneyval committee. The anticipated repercussions this time around are expected to be more severe and enduring than those in 2015, since a modified FATF methodology necessitates greater and longer due process for a decision on removal from the list. Inclusion on the "grey list" would also have significant political, economic, and financial repercussions for BiH citizens and economy.

However, I remain hopeful that this Law can still be adopted in the urgent procedure in the BiH Parliament's House of Peoples, in time for it to be considered for the Moneyval's mutual evaluation. With political will, anything

is possible, and the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina can have a bright future indeed.