

**Interview with Ambassador Jose Luis Herrero, Head of the OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje for daily newspaper Dnevnik, 12 March 2009**



**Interviewer: Hristo Ivanovski**

**Q: Your Excellency, one of your first big tasks will be presidential and local elections due to be held on 22 March. Is OSCE/ODIHR team ready to complete its tasks, and do you have a special plan how to monitor these, in many ways, very important elections?**

The OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission is a long-term mission and quite distinct in its mandate from the ODIHR Mission which is here exclusively to monitor the electoral process. Our mission is on the other side uniquely positioned to support the countries long term democratic development, processes, and objectives – of which internationally recognized electoral outcomes are only one important part. However, these elections are key for the country, especially if we take the conduct of the previous polls into consideration. Violence and infringements of the right to free and fair elections will be considered by many as a major setback for the democratic development of the country in numerous aspects. The OSCE Spillover Monitor Mission to Skopje is here to help the country to have the best elections possible. To achieve this goal our mission works with all relevant actors: political parties, candidates, the police, the State Election Commission, its municipal equivalents and the Ministries of Interior and Justice.

**Q: One of the presidential nominees from opposition party stated that he could expect non violent elections, but not fair or free. What is your assessment on the entire electoral process so far?**

Our initial assessment is entirely consistent with the interim report published by the ODIHR Mission, which was cautiously positive. Tensions occur in all democratic countries – as well as sometimes even aggressive discourse and campaigning.

However, democratic standards have to be met. The right of the individual to participate in free and fair elections is inviolable. Pressure and intimidation by political parties or political activists cannot be tolerated. Until now we have noticed only minor incidents which are also substantially less in numbers compared to the elections in 2008.

**Q: On the election day, members of Interior Ministry will be around many polling stations in the country in order to prevent any possible violence, as we had last year. Are these plans in accordance with the OSCE standards in terms of free voting?**

We don't know in detail what the deployment plan of the Ministry will be. However, the police need to act positively throughout the electoral process: from the start of the campaign, on Election Day and afterwards when dealing with any investigations that might be required. It is important that the officers understand their mandate and create an atmosphere of freedom and fairness. The police has to act in a professional manner. Totally independently from political groups. Their behavior will contribute to a large extend to a free and fair conduct of the polls. Citizens must feel save to cast their ballot without being intimidated or threatened.

**Q: The Council of Europe (CoE) decided to put the country on post-electoral monitoring because last year's elections did not meet the international standards. Have you noticed any improvements this year? CoE noticed systematic problems and those were not fixed so far. Does the country have fairly good legal framework to organize free, fair, and democratic elections?**

The legal framework has improved substantially. Many of the recommendations of the ODIHR report from the early parliamentary elections in 2008 are fully or partly implemented. Certain regulations were harmonized, administrative procedures clarified, providing the election commissions on all levels and other bodies concerned with the conduct with much better guidance. However there is, like everywhere, still space for improvement. Harmonization of laws is one of the most difficult tasks for each Government and Parliament.

**Q: The decision of the Broadcasting Council (BC) to punish some TV stations due to violations of the law was controversial for many journalists. Frankly speaking it is not clear what does a campaign and reporting mean from BC's point of view. What do you think about this decision and about the position of BC - is this body independent and protected from party influence?**

The guidelines of the broadcasting council are indeed rather strict and I recognize that the media and journalists want to provide their audience and readers with the best information possible and that they are not immediately comfortable with these rules. On the other hand we must also understand the regulator. The Broadcasting Council is trying to ensure equal treatment of all media, political parties and candidates. Given the circumstances this is not always an easy task. However, as strict as these guidelines were: the infringements observed seemed to be minor and the media eventually adjusted to the rules. Equally important: the Council did not appear to have acted as the agent of a distinct political party and the legislative framework, safeguarding the independence of the Council seemed to have worked

well.

**Q: Reading newspapers and watching local TVs, do you think that citizens can get enough information to make their choice on the voting day?**

Of importance from my perspective is not necessarily the quantity of information citizens get from the media. Almost more important is the variety and quality of information available. Plurality is the key word here. And what I grasp from the reporting in the local media the citizens do have access to all relevant information in media covering the entire political spectrum. And to some extent it is not necessarily depending on the media how citizens are informed. The candidates carry also certain responsibility. Public debates with participation of all candidates are for example an excellent vehicle to communicate to the audience the different points of view and political programs in many countries. Perhaps it would be a good idea if the candidates for the presidential but also for the municipal elections could agree on such debates on national and local TV. I also understand that candidates in certain municipalities have agreed on joined statements, encouraging activists to adhere to standards and refrain from violations and infringements. This set a very nice example of commitment.

**Q: Comparing to other OSCE participating states, do you think the 20 day-period is enough for a good campaign and promotion of the political platforms by the candidates, speaking for both presidential and local elections?**

Compared to some other countries are 20 days not a very long time. However, what is more important than the duration of the campaign is how the candidates present themselves and their goals and objectives. Programs and approaches have to be visible and communicated in an understandable way to the electorate. Purely aggressive, negative campaigning, in the worst case combined with violent incidents do not help to convey the message to the voters.

**Q: We have two prominent professors from the Faculty of Law, who are running in the presidential race, also a former Ambassador to NATO, the ethnic Albanians also have their candidates... As a foreigner and diplomat, is it thrilling to monitor this campaign?**

All elections are thrilling. Elections are the cornerstone of democracy, manifesting the right of the individual citizen to participate in the decision about future leadership. It doesn't matter if on the municipal or the presidential level. However, the leaders are only part of the electoral process. Equally important are the supporters of the individual candidates. It is crucial that they understand and follow the guidelines and principles put forward by those candidates. I – together with the entire international community – highly appreciate the joined commitment the candidates of these polls show towards free and fair elections and that they do everything to communicate this message to their supporters.

**Q: It is very likely that after the elections, the ruling VMRO-DPMNE could have a total control of power from local level to highest state institutions. Does your Organization worry that pluralism in the country will turn into a sort of one-party system?**

It is impossible for me to predict the outcome of the elections. This decision we have to leave to the voters. However - equal to the media – I consider also in the political sphere plurality as an important quality of a democratic society. And whatever the outcome might be – I don't consider the political landscape here a one-party-system.

**Q: Do you have any recommendations or plans for this state to once have independent state administration?**

The OSCE continues to provide guidance and assistance on the country's ongoing decentralization process. The process of decentralization is significantly increasing the amount of competencies and responsibilities at the local level. Here, promoting increased citizen participation in the local decision-making process has remained a cornerstone of the OSCE Mission's program while assisting local leaders with effective delivery of services to the citizens they represent. But it is extremely important that at both levels, central and municipal, the public administration is further professionalized and less and less politicized. This is a requirement for democratic and efficient governance.