



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Presence in Albania**

Political and Public Affairs Unit

**HEAD OF PRESENCE REMARKS AT A MEETING OF PRESIDENT OF REPUBLIC
AND AMBASSADORS OF USA, EU AND OSCE
WITH STUDENTS OF VLORA UNIVERSITY**

18 April 2011, Vlora

Your Excellency Mr. President,
Ambassador Arvizu,
Ambassador Sequi,
Rector Qarri,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Good morning.

On behalf of the OSCE Presence in Albania, can I say how delighted I am to be here with you this morning and to see so many of the young generation present.

Looking modestly at myself and my International colleagues, it has been a very long time since any of us were sitting where any of you are now sitting in. But we were interested in our lives, like you are, keen to know more about our future and be not simply and only part of it, but also wanting to take it, at least partially, in our own hands.

Ladies and gentlemen, the topic for this morning's discussion is elections – not surprisingly given that we have local government elections due on 8 May.

In underscoring all the comments made by his Excellency the President of the Republic and by my two close counterparts, the esteemed colleagues and partners from the United States and European Union, I would like to take this opportunity to briefly raise with you some issues that I believe are salient as we move nearer to Election Day and beyond.

I should state before I start, that my comments in no way claim to be 'academic' study or thesis.

As a practitioner in the area of public life and diplomacy which includes experience in elections, my comments this morning should simply be taken as perhaps points for a future seminar discussion.

Having established these firm parameters, I think it is important to, first of all, note what public elections are supposed to be all about and with a specific focus on local government elections.

As far as I am concerned, public elections are a time when ordinary citizens have the opportunity to make an informed choice between alternative political party platforms and between differing candidates as to who should govern their locality.

Local government elections are different by the very nature that they are local.

Voters in these elections get to make a choice on who they wish to see deliver local public services. It is about management and management skills. It is about practical life, and it is clearly not about cloudy dreams.

Mr. President, Ambassador Arvizu, Ambassador Sequi, Rector Qarri, ladies and gentlemen,

I do not think it is good when such elections, and I am not just talking about Albania, its equally as applicable in many European states, become simplified into some sort of political ‘beauty contest’ between national party leader A and national party leader B.

When this happens then the real essence, the importance and strategic value of what local self government is all about is sadly diminished. It is about real life and about managing it.

Local government elections should be a time where local people standing as local candidates have a chance to say how they would make their locality better. They should not fall political prey to the political fortunes of their national party leaders.

In the current Albanian context, albeit difficult for some, there is some room for optimism.

I believe that these upcoming local government elections will now be based on better voter list after a new civil registry and address system was built by the Ministry of Interior following a multi million Euros EU funded project implemented by the OSCE Presence.

As a direct result of the project, we should see far fewer ‘duplicates’, of people over 100 years of age listed on the voter list as we know was the case in past elections.

This has to be positive element to these elections and should give real confidence to all Albanian citizens to know that their vote will matter.

So, having tackled the issue of what elections are for and for whom they are for, I think it is important to take a further look at those public institutions that will most likely play an integral role in ensuring that the will of the people is guaranteed and that these elections go off as an unqualified success.

So here is my top five:

In **fifth**, must comes the media.

Perhaps even more so than in more recent times, the media will play a vital role in informing the public and also in scrutinizing the activity of all political parties.

So clearly no small responsibility for those who are known as the ‘Fourth Power’.

I urge all broadcasters and newspaper outlets in particular to be fair, balanced so that all citizens have the chance to make up their own mind as to who to vote for.

As a footnote on the vexed issue of the ‘ready made tapes’ saga, instead of such activities, I frankly think its much better when a journalist has direct access to a public event and reports on it.

That said, there is nothing really wrong with ready-made tapes. However, they should be clearly marked as 'political party material' when shown in TV broadcasts so that viewers can discern what is 'journalism' from what is ostensibly 'advertising'.

The **fourth** key group is the Albanian State Police.

Here I look forward to seeing the State Police play the same impartial and professional role they have played during the past two sets of elections in this country.

As a 'police service', and I stress the words 'service', they will be looked to by all Albanian citizens to assist in creating a calm environment in which these elections can be held.

If the last two elections are anything to go by, I am fairly sure that they will be able to raise the 'bar of success' to even higher plains.

Third must come the Central Elections Commission.

It does not need me to stress the point that the CEC will need to play a key role.

In working together - collectively, co-operatively and constructively, through their own actions they will be able to help ensure that the right atmosphere is achieved.

As civil servants chosen to undertake what is a judicial function, I have no doubt that all seven members will do the right thing in putting the public interest ahead of any external political pressures.

I am equally as sure that both the Chair and Deputy Chair get the point that they have the opportunity to craft an overall environment where either calmness and serenity reign or where discord and bad feeling prevail.

The choices are as stark as this.

Second not surprisingly must come the political parties. And I mean parties. All their members. It is not limited to chairs only, certainly not in local elections.

They have to be aware of the heavy responsibility that lies on their respective shoulders in ensuring that these elections are an outstanding success, ones that meet international standards.

Put very simply - these elections, now these local elections, have to work.

Let us not forget that both main political parties are inextricably linked to the agreement on the current Electoral Code with which these elections will be conducted.

So given that they both wrote the *rules of the game*, there should be frankly no difficulties in both sides steering the ship that is the local government elections on to more calm and still waters.

Indeed, the first OSCE/ODIHR recommendation makes a clear point that the main issue is for both political sides to get on with each other.

Both sides somehow found a consensus back in the spring of 2008 so they can do it again if they really want to.

One other thing that they need to do is to ensure that the political rhetoric both calm, and reasonable.

It means enabling all citizens to learn about what the policies that the candidates stand for, for them to make an independent and informed decision on whom to vote for and then be able to go freely to the polling station to vote.

So it's a time only for policies and constructive argument – and not a time for 'name calling' or worse still violence/unnecessary incidents.

As by way of example, last week I was driving with my wife just on the outskirts of Tirana and I came across a tremendous number of motor cars sporting blue and red flags driving all around the immediate vicinity.

It was certainly a wonder of Technicolor if nothing else! Fun though this is to a point and it also happens in most other countries too, all political parties here should keep in mind that treating the public roads of Albania as some sort of Silverstone or Hockenheim cannot be the ideal.

Was it not the former US Ambassador to the United Nations and former US Presidential candidate Adlai E Stevenson who once said:

The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like breakfast cereal - that you can gather votes like box tops - is, I think, the ultimate indignity to the democratic process.

OR

As, and I hope Ambassador Sequi likes this one, Leonardo Da Vinci once said:

Where there is shouting, there is no true knowledge.

So can we agree then that these elections should be about campaigning and political argument.

I should also say at this juncture that the work of the CEC could be greatly assisted if all lower level election commissioners remain in their seats and are not 'swapped' by the political parties at the very last minute.

I am equally as confident that political parties will allow the due legal process to continue in line with the Electoral Code as we proceed towards Election Day and as the post Election Day appeals process commences.

Also as his Excellency the President of the Republic has rightly said recently, full transparency is needed in the way political parties receive money.

The **first** and main 'key' group are, of course, are you, are all Albanian citizens.

I would encourage all of you here and those noting our deliberations this morning to actually enjoy the next few weeks as Election Days should be seen as real 'festivals of democracy'!

Let's not forget that elections are for you the people to decide who you want to represent them.

You should feel fully confident that you will be able to cast your vote and be confident that it will be counted.

It is important to stress that your votes will matter, that all votes will be properly administered, counted, and that the post-election appeals process will be based on the rule of law, and that the process will be both impartial and transparent.

I am confident that the votes of the Albanian citizens on 8 May will result in a freely and fairly elected local government, locally elected structures that will work hard over the next four years in serving the public good and that they will help contribute to furthering the European ambitions of Albania.

With Albania's integration aspirations well known, this is the right time for all Albanians to take ownership of the process to ensure we see an election take place here in Albania that all the people deserve.

Be active, seek information, always ask questions and debate the issues with others.

As some sort of postscript, I am fairly well aware, as I think my two colleagues are too, that we as the International community are often perceived as the judges in any electoral process.

Can I humbly suggest to you that such a perception is at best misguided and at most flatly wrong.

I believe the Albanian Constitution and Electoral Code clearly states where ownership of the election process begins and ends – Albanian state institutions and through them the Albanian citizens.

Put simply, you the Albanian people have to want these elections to succeed more than we do.

Mr President, Ambassador Arvizu, Ambassador Sequi, Rector Qarri, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us all now look forward to seeing these elections turning out as an unqualified success.

And when the elections have finally concluded, there is an urgent need I believe to see an electoral reform take place in good time so that the strongest possible foundations are laid for preparations for the 2013 parliamentary elections.

Preparations should start day one after the end of these elections.

Although it has not happened in the past, this time it needs to happen.

And if I may, can I end, and I hope Ambassador Arvizu will like this one, with a quotation from President Obama when he said:

Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.

Thank you very much.