

Interview with Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Pavel Vacek

Klan magazine

4 November 2006

Q: Mr. Vacek this week you will be two years in your function as Head of the OSCE Presence. If you go back in time what did you expect when you first came and have your expectations been met?

A: “I’ve learned that things are often not what they appear to be... And expectations? One can have many, but in a way they are less important than how one’s resolutions and plans have been fulfilled. In one important aspect the Presence has been able to deliver: in that period, we have been able to channel more resources into the country than ever before. We have been less successful in walking away from political facilitation of domestic reform processes – not because we wouldn’t want to, but because the demand from the Albanian side still remains.”

Q: Considering the difficult experience of your predecessor, the day when you were assigned the position as Head of Presence did you receive any warning on the difficulties you could face with the politics of a small country like Albania?

A: “Yes, I did receive some friendly advice. What I have always distilled from such advice is more or less the following: stay impartial, don’t allow others to instrumentalise what you are mandated to do, don’t let yourself become part of any political games.”

Q: During these two years can you mention some of the most difficult moments in your relations with the Albanian political class?

A: “Some moments within political mediation... Because one is told one is needed, one feels under an obligation. Yet at the same time one knows that every such intervention delays the very moment when the country is able to resolve such problems by itself.”

Q: Is it difficult to be an impartial moderator? We can recall here that the latest agreement reached, where you were one of the moderators is still in a deadlock.

A: “Yes, it is always difficult to be impartial and yes, it is even more difficult to remain impartial and also to be perceived as impartial. To resolve any such deadlock must always be in the hands of the Albanian political representation and not the International community.”

Q: Some Albanian politicians have positioned themselves against the OSCE Presence. They even have considered its time here exceeded, and have often criticized its role and work. How would you answer to such positions?

A: “I can only respond to rational arguments... And if it helps I can reiterate that the Presence is not here forever, we gradually draw down and I know the Government’s view in that regard. But isn’t it so that when somebody starts calling for the departure of the Presence it usually happens at the moment when our advice goes against that person’s or parties’ political agenda? It is part of the job I guess.”

Q: Ceka, Meta and Gjinushi have not spared themselves against you lately. They have gone as far as to call the Presence as a “tourist agency” and you as a head-tourist. Which is the role the OSCE Presence playing at the moment?

A: “I cannot relate to insults... But if you want facts, here they are: the Presence promotes democratisation, the rule of law, and human rights and helps consolidate democratic institutions. In particular, it supports building the capacity of the Albanian Assembly. It assists in electoral, judicial, legislative and property reforms, supports the Albanian State Police and other authorities in fighting corruption and trafficking. Overall, the Presence promotes good governance through the strengthening of civil society – including advancing media independence and professional standards.

In security co-operation, we have trained over 1,000 police officials on anti-trafficking, border surveillance and election policing issues. The Presence has also provided expertise on the new state police law and on integrated border management, and specifically provided border surveillance equipment and solar panel generators for border crossing-points and supported cross-border meetings with neighbouring police and border counterparts.

We assist in the area of good governance in economic and environmental issues and, for example, completed the ‘first registration’ of tens of thousands of properties. Most recently, we have agreed with the Government to focus on areas of illegal settlement to assist the legalisation process. We have supported the restitution and compensation process and its institutions, assisting with the drafting of legislation and the provision of technical equipment;

We have also supported the Government in creating a code of ethics that included rules against economic and sexual exploitation of children in the tourist industry. The Presence led a project for unemployed young people from minority groups in northern cities, promoting their economic empowerment. With local government, we have helped improve the public consultation process and to make it more transparent. We have encouraged greater environmental awareness and co-operate with the authorities and civil society. We also helped establish the Aarhus Centre in Albania to promote public access to environmental information.

I believe it is quite known that we helped draft all the zone boundaries for the 2005 parliamentary elections. We also led a project to improve voter registration - the final OSCE/ODIHR Election Report noted an improved accuracy in voter lists. We are preparing for major work in assisting with modernisation of the civil registry and address system.

The Presence has extensively commented on legislation affecting police, gender and witness protection issues. We have trained over one hundred judges on ethics and juvenile justice issues. We have also analyzed the functioning of the courts, provided recommendations to the Government, and worked to make citizens aware of their rights.

In our work with the Assembly, we helped draft new procedural rules to strengthen the role of the Assembly in overseeing government work, organized seminars for Deputies and provided technical equipment to improve public access.

We work with civil society and support a women's counselling centre in Kukes, in northern Albania, to promote women's rights. We are also mandated to work with the media – we have reviewed and prepared media legislation, we have helped create the Council on Media Ethics, updated the Code of Ethics for journalists and provided the University of Tirana Journalism School with a new curriculum and strategy.

So as you can see, the Presence is in the business of working with our Albanian partners to achieve substantive reform. I don't have time to waste replying to unjustified criticisms from those who have historically always taken the same view."

Q: What could be the reasons that some politicians are reacting like this against the Presence?

A: "Maybe you should ask them that question..."

Q: It is clear that Albania has not passed over the political crisis that started last July. Some are of the opinion that the Presence should have intervened earlier to help solve this crisis. Do you think we are in a political crisis and if yes what do you think could be the solution?

A: "That judgement is not mine. We offered informal tips on the most immediate problems on the electoral reform and electoral preparations. The rest has to be for the Albanian political representation to deal with."

Q: Different from your predecessor you do not prefer to be often in the media and make public statements. You have chosen the institutional way. Why? Is it part of your own way of doing things or there are other reasons?

A: "Perhaps this is about the method, person or style. Or perhaps it is another way of showing that I do not want to interfere in domestic politics."

Q: Is there any warning that the Presence will not have any more a crucial role as before? That the Presence's role might decrease significantly?

A: "Of course it is bound to decrease over time. Such a gradual reduction of role and size must be based upon a collective will of OSCE participating states and of course of

the host country. The principal instruments are the mandate and the budget adopted by consensus.”

Q: The Albanian politics takes you a lot of time. How do you spent you free time?

A: “I try to spend most of my free time with sports. Lately, I read less than I would wish...music is limited to listening to CDs...”

Q: What about your family and children? How do they cope with it? You are not with them most of the time.

A: “I have no family or children which of course makes the work easier but the personal life shallower...”