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

Journalist: Skënder Minxhozi

1. Your H.E. Ambassador, the electoral process has recently been completed in Albania. What is your overall assessment on the way the electoral process took place?

The overall assessment will be provided by the ODIHR Election Observation Mission. I can only speak of personal impression and the one I have is that the elections were better than in the past but worse than it ought to be. The good turnout has shown the interest of Albanian voters in the future of their country and their respect for the institutions. Many Albanians performed as domestic observers which is another good feature of these last elections. Many election commissions did their best and I saw some of these work quietly and harmoniously in places where life is hard. Others failed because partisanship prevailed over impartial duty and that has been a great part of the problem. The key election institutions have been working hard to cope with the avalanche of complaints. The Police, too, have done their best on the election days.

2. There has been a wide debate regarding the prolonged process of appeals and complaints on the part of the political parties. Does this issue represent a concern for your organization?

Which is your organisation too... the OSCE is also owned by Albania. An Albanian concern is our concern too. Of course, further artificial protraction of the whole election process due to obstructionist complaints and appeals would be of increasing international concern.

3. When will the final report of OSCE/ODIHR be made public?

You may have heard that from Jorgen Grunnet - usually it's around one month after the final election results are announced.

4. These elections were considered beforehand an important moment to adjudicate the progress and pace of Albania towards the European Union integration. Do you think Albania has passed this test?

The European Commission and the EU Presidency are better addressees of this question. However, I deem that Albania does not improve its legislation and democratic institutions only in order to make it into EU one day - to achieve that is a national self-interest and an end in itself.

5. While the electoral process was still going on, many political players have voiced their dissatisfaction with the present electoral system. Do you think that there will be revisions to the Electoral Code in the upcoming months? Do you think that a proportional based electoral system will be a better formula than the present one?

The current Albanian electoral system is complicated and leaves room for abuse as we have seen. However, there are experts who will tell you that this mix of majoritarian and proportional system is in fact modern and progressive. If there is a political will to further improve the current electoral legislation, we will assist in the legislative work. We will equally assist if the political representation opts for some variant of the proportional system. There is no international standard which would tell you which system is better. But there are recommendations and accumulated expertise of OSCE and CoE which may help devise the details of the system and the underlying legislation. Many international recommendations were not respected in the previous reform, due to domestic political considerations that prevailed. This Presence here will not be the arbiter of correctness of the fundamental choices that have to be made by the Albanian political representation. What should be equally clear a priori is that no system is entirely foolproof, each can be exploited, obstructed ... or sabotaged if there is the will to do it...

6. Do you think that the political rotation that is taking place, will create problems for the relations of Albania with the international community?

I am not the one to tell.. But why should it create problems? Changes of governments occur everywhere in the democratic world from time to time and the life goes on. The right choices in democracies are limited, political parties' programmes converge on strategic political issues...Of course, you know the right answer... it all depends on the policies, rather those pursued than declared...

7. What is your view on the role of OSCE in future developments in Albania? How much do you believe in the thesis that states that the process of European integration in which Albania has embark and the EU monitoring mechanisms create overlaps in the work and activities of OSCE in Albania?

What we do is well consulted with the Commission and the EU Presidency and synergistic with the EU and Albanian objectives within the integration process. Our work contributes, some of it directly, to the Albanian EU aspirations. Duplications are the luxury we cannot afford. Would anybody tell me where are those overlaps?

8. In the past few years there has been gradual reduction of the OSCE activities in Albania, especially in respect to the closure of some field offices. What do you think of this process?

There has been an overall trend towards reducing, driven both from within Albania as well as from the outside. While the overall reductions of the OSCE unified budget stem from the collective will of the 55 OSCE nations, including Albania, some of the reductionist calls coming from within Albania stem from an erroneous belief that a cut

into the Presence's budget or structure demonstrates a progress. It does not... for as long as the domestic problem or deficiency remains there ... and that is my point. On the other hand, I also understand that the in-coming new government expects more assistance from us rather than less and that is something we have to respect. It is known that we are proposing a zero growth budget for the Presence in 2006, we will replace some internationals with national officers, we may reduce the overall number of staff. In other words, we are bracing for having to do the same amount of work or even more with the same or even less resources. Of course, there will come the day when the Presence in Albania closes down and it will be preceded by a period of more radical draw-down. Before it comes to it, in the short term perspective, it will be more rational for us to look for maximising the effect of the limited resources of this Organisation's Presence than have to face campaigns against our remaining field stations. I know they are liked by local representatives and people and I believe they are needed for our further work.