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Interview with Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Osmo Lipponen

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In his address to the US Helsinki Commission, the representative of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Osmo Lipponen, made some stern criticism of the functioning of the democratic process in Albania. Ambassador Lipponen, who is about to leave Albania, in an interview with Voice of America after the hearing session put the stress on the importance and at the same time the difficulties that characterize the electoral process for the coming elections in Albania.

Voice of America: Mr. Ambassador, your address to the US Helsinki Commission introduces a murky picture of the situation in Albania, at a time when the country is one year away from the next parliamentary elections. You have been involved closely as a mediator in the Albanian politics with regard to the electoral process. Does Albania run the risk to miss an opportunity for progress in the coming elections too, as it was the case in the elections of October 2003?

Ambassador Lipponen: Perhaps what I said in the address may present the situation as dim, but I think it was a realistic description of this situation. These are the facts. The socio-economic reality in Albania is like that and before the reforms start, the facts have to be known. Albania is the second poorest country in Europe and despite the fast progress, the gap between the rich and the poor is growing deeper. When people see the surrounding reality and compare it to their country, this has a negative psychological impact on them. OSCE has mediated the electoral process, but this has been very difficult. The first discussions about the *ad hoc* parliamentary committee on elections were held in the months of January and February. The talks lasted for about two months, to see if the political will and the mutual trust between the parties existed. Now that the work has started, within two weeks, we expect to see concrete results. The two major parties have agreed to reach concrete results concerning the balancing and restructuring of the Central Election Commission within two weeks. The composition of this Commission has been one of the major reasons for lack of trust between them. If this issue is resolved, than the confidence and trust in the process will increase. However, there is still a lot to be done so that elections go well.

Voice of America: Recently you mediated an agreement between the Socialist Party and Democratic Party on the Electoral Code, which was criticized strongly by the smaller parties. Although your argumentation was that in the Albanian political reality there could be no adequate political climate without an agreement between the two major parties, does such a pragmatic stand harm the political process in general?

Ambassador Lipponen: No, in fact, this is a normal part of the democratic process. The political forces represented in the parliament have the right to reach agreements between each other. And this was an agreement between them. There are different interpretations whether the agreement is mandatory for parliament and the Constitutional Court will express its position in this regard. Why is it important? They are the major political forces in the contest and if one of them remains out of the formula to solve the electoral problems, in particular concerning the improvement of the voter's lists, this would pave the way for the defeating party to say in the future that they had not agreed on the process. Consequently, these two parties should be involved in the process. On the other hand, these parties have their partners, too, both in government and in opposition. If, for different reasons, they do not want discussion in a preliminary stage with the other smaller parties, I think this is a normal political activity in a multi-party system. There have been suspicions that the vital interests of the smaller parties have been discussed and already decided on, but nothing pertaining to it has been discussed or decided on.

Voice of America: You have strongly criticized the Albanian politics. I quote: ...“the Albanian parliament is underdeveloped and is used mainly as a space to publicize political disputes”. Whereas with respect to the government you say that... “the process of decision-making is a closed one, accountable to no one and non-transparent”. How far or how close is Albania to the limit of what is called a failed state?

Ambassador Lipponen: I would not call it a failed state. Albania should be viewed in the context of its background and resources, lack of political and democratic tradition. In this context, the country is trying to make steps forward and has made progress. Just the same, it is true that parliament is not developed. It is short of advisors. The parliamentary committees do not do the necessary preparatory work and they do not have the appropriate assistance. Work is underway and the OSCE has provided considerable assistance. For example, during the preparation of the law on budget, one of the most important laws, such a thing was not noticed. All the interested actors, civil society, political parties and the like should come together during the debates on the budget and give their opinions. In Albania such a thing did not take place. What happened was that the government proposed the budget and parliament did not even express its opinion. The principle that parliament is the one to provide the government with financial resources did not apply. On the other hand, the political decision faces similar problems. The government does not have the necessary resources and the normal process of counseling and consultation is also missing. In a functioning democratic system, the government discusses its projects with all the interested parties. But in Albania this is not functioning. It is too difficult to access government decisions, even the most routine ones. They refer to decision such and such, or a by-law, but the text is not found. It happens that parliament adopts a law, but for that law to come into effect, it has to be published in the Official Gazette and it happens in Albania that two or three years pass by before it is published. Thus, it is the lack of tradition, lack of transparency.

Voice of America: Albania is often criticized for the state corruption. What is feeding it and has the country reached the point that corruption and organized crime are too widespread and powerful to fight?

Ambassador Lipponen: I would wish the situation has not reached that far. But these elections are extremely important in this direction, too. We have come to know from the political parties that there is a lot of interest to include in the lists candidates with a lot of money, or to give money to the supposedly real candidates. If such a thing happens, a black economy would be established and if various interests found shelter we would have a huge impact on parliament and on the entire system that would really result fatal to the country.

Voice of America: Mr. Ambassador, soon you will be leaving Albania. What impressions would you take with you?

Ambassador Lipponen: I am not ready yet to give my condensed impressions, but I would say that I come from a small country with a history similar to Albania's. It seems that the majority of the countries go through civil unrests. My country has also gone through such stages, but today we are among the best students in the classroom, when it comes to democracy. Albania and Albanians have a very strong self-respect, which is good, but sometimes this feeling is too strong. Accepting constructive criticism, accepting reality in Albania is very difficult. It is a kind of pride that is, how to say, wrong. Albanians are hard-workers, they make huge efforts and undoubtedly deserve a better social and political future. They do have the necessary capacity. The intellectual elite is well-prepared, people speak several foreign languages, have the needed knowledge and the preparation they have is very promising, if some obstacles, which are real, such as the dysfunction of democracy, corruption and the like, discussed during the address, are triumphed over. If Albania integrates itself, it has huge capacities and chances for the future.