

Standard newspaper, 24 February 2006

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

Journalist: Blerina Gjoka

The OSCE welcomed immediately the ad hoc parliamentary committee on electoral reform, which is not established yet. How are you reading the debates between the big political parties and their smaller allies on the right to veto?

The important thing is that these debates among political parties are ongoing without a need for an external involvement and it should remain the case... However, it is desirable that the Ad hoc Committee on electoral reform be able to start working – when this happens, the OSCE, both ODIHR and the Presence, can start providing their expert and technical support to the Committee.

Under an agreement of the two largest parties, it was decided that the Constitution will not be touched. Does the OSCE recommend that the reform should also consider changes in the Constitution for some issues that have caused heated political debates, such as electoral system and election of the President of Republic?

In that regard, the OSCE ODIHR recommendations are not prescriptive... The choice on how to proceed is in the hands of Albanian political actors – whether they wish to go for a sweeping review of the electoral system right away or they wish to address the issues relevant for the next municipal elections as a priority. It is good that the Ad hoc Committee is tasked to address the ODIHR Recommendations from 2005 elections. But there are also those previous recommendations, including the Joint ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations of 2004, which have not been addressed fully or at all, for one reason or another. There is the earlier recommendation by ODIHR to look for simplifying the electoral system. The 2005 report by ODIHR leaves the question whether to change the electoral system up to the Albanian stakeholders. A change of the electoral system would require amending the Constitution and that's an uneasy thing, that is obvious...

What will be the role of the OSCE in the new electoral reform?

Together with ODIHR, we will offer expert and technical assistance to the Assembly if this is sought. As in the past, the assistance will be given to improve the electoral legislation, in line with the OSCE Commitments, ODIHR recommendations and other international standards for democratic elections. I emphasise that we are not the ones to guarantee that it happens - that always remains in the hands of Albanian political actors.

What do you think are the most urgent issues the new committee should be dealing with? Is there anything that should be improved ahead of the upcoming local government elections?

I believe that there is enough lessons learnt on the Albanian side to see what the Ad hoc Committee should start dealing with...and, naturally, the next municipal elections is the priority. But if you insist, I can mention - some of things that also stem from the past elections observations: Firstly, a reasonable certainty over the election date would be useful,

as this affects the hierarchy of timelines for the preparation of the election process. Secondly, further improvements to Voter Lists provisions are needed - the Ministry of Interior, with our support, have started discussing the preparations with the mayors and the CEC. Further on, provisions on middle- and lower-level election commissions should be revisited, both in terms of their composition and performance. Also counting and tabulation procedures should be reviewed and refined. There is room for improving efficiency of the procedure of appeals to decisions by electoral administration.

The office that you represent has recently taken a different line from the EU. More specifically, the OSCE said that the Zogu i Zi flyover issue could influence the negotiations with the EU, while Ambassador Salzman did not share this opinion. Why did this happen?

We did not say what you are saying we said ...but if you wish to get back to this, be it. It's a fact of life that domestic developments, especially when we are talking about governance problems, tend to affect external ambitions, in one way or another. It is another question whether the particular controversy, the Zogu i Zi and related problems, do or do not negatively affect Albania's external interests... and it is yet another question whether the Presence should have pronounced itself on it. I say that the judgments on EU related issues are not ours and we explained that to partners concerned, both on the Albanian and on the international side. That's the end of story, at least for me...

What is the perspective of the OSCE monitoring of Albania? How long will this monitoring last?

We are not tasked to do monitoring – there is another international mission here in Albania which bears the notion of monitoring in its name... Of course, we need to follow developments relevant for our assistance work in the mandated areas. Without that, we would be operating in isolation and without knowledge what is going on around us. In that regard, we only do what other international organisations assisting Albania also do... And how long will the OSCE Presence last? As long as the Albanian government and the other 54 OSCE states consider the Presence useful...

Some political leaders have recently criticised strongly the OSCE Presence for overcoming its competencies regarding its role in some sensitive political issues. Sabri Godo even asked for the way the Presence functions to be changed. What is your comment on this criticism?

Nobody is immune from criticism but it must be factually correct... I simply don't think that we have overstepped our mandate.