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

By Cerciz Loloci

- **Mr. Ambassador, I would like you to comment on the progress of the general developments in Albania.**

I will present my report before the OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna at the beginning of June, but I will give some general remarks here. The problems Albania is facing are major. Numerous efforts have been invested in solving them, but the progress is slow or yet to be achieved. The foundations for a fast development are not in place yet. However, the political and judicial/legal systems offer encouragement, with the Nano-Berisha agreement and the work of the bipartisan committee on electoral reform bringing a promise of an inspiring political culture. Functional democracy and transparent administration are also required for a political, economic and social development. The administration still does not possess the resources necessary for a successful work, so input of the international community, including the OSCE, is still very much needed.

- **Can you comment on the fact that the Albanian society is facing very serious concerns (high crime rate, trafficking, weakness of the justice system) that are also worrying for the region?**

These problems are the plague of all the countries in the region, to a varying degree. However, since the last fall, the regional perspective and the need for co-ordinated international efforts have received better understanding, opening way for new activities and comprehensive regional policy planning. The OSCE, the Stability Pact, the EU and NATO have encountered an improved co-operation in the region. This year the OSCE, under the Dutch Chairmanship-in-Office, has put a special emphasis on the fight against trafficking.

- **Some international reports including those of your office have practically showed that the governing has not been effective in the fight against corruption, trafficking from Albania and from the region. Given this situation, can a new government be sought?**

Any government would have to face the same problems and also the lack of resources. As I referred earlier, what is needed is a change in the political climate, especially in the government-opposition relations. Countries which face difficulties need consensual elements in their politics, so that everybody's voice is heard to a certain degree also by the government. Without a change in the political culture, I do not see a significant change in the country's ability to solve its problems, regardless of who is in power.

- **What is your opinion about the fact that the Albanian institutions remain fragile and dependant on the political pressure?**

Missing transparency, weak civil service culture, and undeveloped civil society are the main factors that make such a situation possible.

- **Lately, there has been a series of court cases involving senior officials suing opposition media outlets and journalists who are critical of the government performance. Are you aware of these processes and do you have any objection?**

Yes, we are aware, and we keep a close look on them. We also know that the Albanian Penal Code contains several articles dealing with defamation and insult. Some of them give special protection to state officials and symbols. In this context, I would like to recall the words of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media who recently expressed his firm belief that no special protection should be afforded to public officials who should exercise a greater level of tolerance toward criticism than ordinary citizens. He also stressed that no journalist should be sentenced to prison for what he or she writes, and in a democracy, writing about the activities of public servants is part of a journalist's professional duties. These are also principles stated in the London Declaration on Challenges to Media Freedom, from November 2000, which states that the repeal of criminal defamation laws in favour of civil laws should be considered, in accordance with relevant international standards. Also, the State, objects such as flags or symbols, government bodies, and public authorities of all kinds should be prevented from bringing defamation actions; laws which provide special protection for public figures should be repealed; and no one should be liable under defamation law for the expression of an opinion. I would also like to stress that independent and pluralistic media are essential to a free and open society and accountable systems of government.

- **Now let us talk about the focus of your work. Do you think Albania and its institutions are self-sufficient in the field of security?**

In today's world there is no society that is self-sufficient in the field of security. Every nation needs international security co-operation. Albania's capacity in this field is increasing slowly, thanks to intensive co-operation with key security organisations and other countries.

- **What is your comment on the fact that several politicians have called for the downsizing of the OSCE Presence in Albania?**

What is important here is that we have received full support of the government to our Presence's restructured activities. Prime Minister Nano recently reiterated his support to the OSCE Presence in Albania. At the same time, the leader of the opposition, Dr. Berisha, is also giving the Presence his support, and the work we are carrying in good co-operation with the government and the rest of the society is proceeding well. I think that is all that counts.

- **What would you assess as a positive development in the work of the parliamentary bipartisan committee?**

I have stressed on several occasions that the bipartisan committee is a success story of the recent Albanian politics, as it represented opening to normalisation of the political

culture, provided useful lessons of the win-win situations and the ways to combine expertise with the political know-how.