



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Address by Mr. Erion Veliaj, Minister of Social Welfare and Youth of Albania

As delivered by Ambassador Daniel B. Baer
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 6, 2014

We welcome Minister Veliaj to the Permanent Council, and we thank you for your thoughtful remarks. Albania has taken an active role in the OSCE. Your delegation's intensive engagement on Human Dimension issues and Albania's hosting last year of the High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination all speak to the commitment you and your colleagues here in Vienna have to this organization.

We attach particular value to your observations today because of your personal experience both in civil society and now in government. We have long advocated for greater interaction between civil society and government in all OSCE participating States, as a way to produce more effective policy that addresses the real concerns of citizens and has a lasting positive impact on comprehensive security. We welcome your experience on both sides of that dialogue, you have particular insight into the strengths of each contributor.

Minister Veliaj, your comments come to us today as we all prepare to celebrate International Women's Day this weekend. The United States believes gender issues should be at the forefront of the OSCE's work. Given that 2014 is the 10th anniversary of the OSCE Gender Action Plan, we look forward to acknowledging this milestone later this year. Equality between men and women is a fundamental principle of the OSCE. Women play a critical role in security-related decision-making processes, including those involving conflict prevention, crisis management, and post-conflict rehabilitation efforts. We repeat our call for the OSCE to engage in meaningful discussion of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and how the OSCE might aid in its implementation.

But our discussion should not end there. We should also focus on combating domestic violence – a scourge we see across the OSCE space. Violence against women saps the strength and resilience of our societies and their ability to respond to crises. Individuals must be free to live in their own homes without fear of violence. Minister Veliaj, you and your Prime Minister have taken the important step of raising the profile of this issue in your own country. We encourage you to rely on the OSCE's resources as you tackle this problem in Albania, and we look forward to hearing updates on your progress.

Closely linked to eliminating domestic violence and to comprehensive security is the need for greater economic empowerment of women. As long as women depend on their male relatives for financial well-being, with no possible alternatives, they remain vulnerable to violence. Beyond that link, greater economic empowerment of women increases the economic potential of a country, through new ideas, new skills, and expanded markets.

My old boss, Secretary Clinton, not only distinguished herself, of course, as a statesperson, but also as a champion of women, and one of the things that she's fond of pointing out is the amount of GDP that is left on the table by societies that do not achieve gender equality. And in this era of economic challenges none of us should leave that GDP on the table.

Mr. Minister, we also see anti-corruption as another important link between women and economic growth. The United States believes that corruption, whether it be in the public or the private sector, represents one of the most serious threats to comprehensive security in the OSCE area today. Indeed, it stands at the core of many of the challenges we deal with here on a daily basis. Women have an important role to play in the fight against corruption, and we would be pleased to hear your views on how to involve them more in this critical struggle, particularly given your work with civil society.

Women should play a greater role in environmental decision-making across the OSCE as well. We are pleased that the Economic and Environmental Committee plans to hold a thematic meeting later this spring on gender and the environment, and look forward to the results of that discussion.

Lastly, we would like to be able to say that the OSCE itself is at the forefront of promoting gender equality, but sadly, that is not the case. Albania has set an important example in this regard, with a significant increase in the number of female ministers this past year. Despite years of attention and statements here in Vienna, however, we have not achieved gender balance among senior appointments in the OSCE's institutions and field operations. This must change.

I would like to thank my Canadian colleague for the statement that she read out, and would like to suggest that the "little mouse" she referred to may have left the yellow flower as a sign of solidarity, because I too agree that women's rights are not women's work, and it's the responsibility of each of us around this table, and our governments, to work as hard as we can to achieve gender equality.

We again thank you, Minister Veliaj, for your presence here today and your remarks.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.