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

Journalist: Alma Çupi

Q: Mr. Ambassador, we are only two weeks away from 3 July parliamentary elections. Can you tell us what are the main OSCE concerns regarding the electoral campaign?

There is a multitude of concerns over a number of irregularities. We are less concerned by technical and administrative irregularities, which can be remedied. I believe that all of the responsible authorities, be it the Central Election Commission, the Ministry of Local Government and Decentralization, the mayors, and the election commissions, are doing their best to address the procedural and administrative irregularities. Currently, we are more concerned with the fact that there are candidates put in to the running by their respective parties, who do not behave according to the highest standards adopted by the Albanian political parties that are contained in the code of conduct.

Q: It is said that these elections are an important test regarding the stabilisation and association agreement? What do you think is the main risk of these elections?

The principal issue is whether Albania will be able to have better elections, as much in conformity with the international standards and OSCE commitments as possible. And it has been known that that is the challenge which makes these elections so important not only for the country itself, its own democracy, but also for the external ambitions of the country. I guess the risk which I see is that the combination of all various individual irregularities of different types will in the overall prevent the country from having considerably better elections.

Q: What is your opinion regarding the Dushk phenomenon and the way it is being implemented in this electoral campaign?

Our opinion has been formulated through reports produced by the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission. That is something which also represents the opinion of ours and, to put it simply, it has been observed that the effect of such tactical voting deals is distortive. That is a fact of life, which has been known and observed by us on a number of occasions.

Personally, I do not think that Albanian voters know enough of these deals, of these tactical voting arrangements being concluded among the parties, and for as long as they do not know enough they can hardly make informed choices.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, do you think that the delay in the voter lists can put the conduct of elections at risk?

There has been a number of problems registered on the voter lists being prepared and now we are talking about the final voter lists. We have been involved in supporting the Albanian authorities in producing better voter lists. There have been delays, of course, on various levels and various stages of processes, but we also see that the delays have resulted in a corrective action. We certainly do see a continuous improvement, which is also due to corrective actions taken by various authorities involved in the preparation of the voter lists, be it by the Minister of Local Government and Decentralization or the mayors themselves. Our purpose has been to help Albania achieve a better voter list. There have been resources invested into this which came from the European Commission and we believe that the effort of ours which we have undertaken jointly with the Albanian authorities will produce the desirable result, but sure there are also some systemic problems inherent to the electoral system and we will get to these.

Q: Are you optimistic that these elections will go smoothly?

I have to be optimistic. That is part of our attitude and approach to things. But at the same time, as the election day approaches, we cannot help to see that the irregularities are proliferating. I would re-emphasize the point that it is not the administrative issues which are likely to derail the process, but it is much rather the issues which have to do with the responsibility of the political parties and their respective leadership, and the degree of their accountability for the behaviour of concrete people, be it the candidates and then more concretely on the election day the performance of the election administration, including the performance of the election commissions. That is the key to having better elections according to international standards.