



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Presence in Albania**

**REPORT BY THE HEAD OF THE OSCE PRESENCE IN ALBANIA
TO THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL, 20 SEPTEMBER 2007**

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the last Presence's Report to the Permanent Council in June 2006, the Albanian Government pursued reform efforts in a politically polarised environment due to a tense relationship between the Ruling Coalition and the Opposition. Until summer 2007, mutual mistrust and a lack of goodwill between the protagonists tended to complicate the debate on major domestic reforms and to dilute focus on substantive issues. A number of important legislative and systemic decisions, including on key fiscal and economic issues and a tax reform package, were taken by the Government and, consequently, by the Assembly with the Opposition often boycotting in protest and with the Ruling Coalition perceived as unwilling to relate to opposing or alternative views.

The Government focused on raising the revenues of the state budget and on increasing the efficiency of public administration overall, and made efforts to move ahead with major infrastructural projects (including principal roads, the electricity production and distribution, water and sewage systems) and pursued its declared anti-corruption and crime-fighting policies. It also resolved the privatisation of the state telephone company and was preparing for several other privatisations in the state energy sector. It continued to devolve some of the infrastructural responsibilities to the Municipalities, including the funding burden. It has had to cope with an electricity crisis in summer 2007 due to the widening gap between the increasing domestic consumption on the one hand and the declining domestic production and the state's capacity to import electricity from abroad on the other. Two years after coming to power, the Government began to finalise a number of sectoral and cross-cutting strategies, which have been consulted with international partners. In developing its planning and management responsibilities, it drew upon a donor-funded Integrated Planning System (IPS) and continued to consolidate its leadership in donor co-ordination.

The local government elections of February 2007 which, according to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission final report of 5 June 2007, "*only partly met OSCE commitments*", were preceded by tense political negotiations, with an international involvement, and were followed by a protracted post-electoral litigation period with the final election results declared only in June 2007. The election of the new President by the Assembly on 20 July 2007 - the latest major event of the reporting period - took place within the confines of the constitutional procedure and without international mediation. These events have also deferred substantive outcomes of the electoral reform process.

The Presence has continued to consult closely on its activities (including projects), with the Albanian authorities and other partners and continues to take account of Government's priorities looking for complementarity with the work of other international partners. The OSCE/ODIHR deployed both long-term and short-term observation missions for the local government elections to which the Presence provided local support. The visit by the OSCE Secretary General, Ambassador M. de Blichambaut on 9 - 11 April 2007 gave

impulse to the Presence's work on key projects and further contributed to the relationship with the host country. The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly despatched its Rapporteur on Budget and Management, Dr. P. Blondal to Albania on 9 - 12 July 2007.

2. POLITICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Elections have been a dominant issue throughout the period. The Ad Hoc Committee on Electoral Reform (AHC) was first made operational on 19 January 2006 (extended from December 2005), and a further AHC was created on 18 May 2006 all to review the Code prior to the local government elections. It was repeatedly renewed as its work was stalled by a lack of dialogue between the Ruling Coalition and Opposition and by divergences on the use of the temporary residence registers as one of the sources for compiling voter lists, the timelines for the compilation of the lists and the timing of elections itself. The last AHC mandate expired on 14 November 2006 with no amendments to the Electoral Code having been approved. To overcome the impasse, a bi-partisan agreement was concluded on the use of birth certificates in the elections impasse followed by another, wider pact reached at a round-table under the aegis of the President on 12 January 2007. This pact led to the passage by the Assembly of amendments to the Constitution and the Electoral Code on 13 January 2007 which were adopted specifically for use in the municipal elections. A Special Envoy of the Spanish Chairman-in-Office was sent to Tirana to support the process. The election date, initially set for January 2007, was finally rescheduled for 18 February 2007.

Belated agreement on amendments to the Electoral Code, reached only 35 days prior to the Election Day affected electoral preparations. Election Day itself was conducted generally smoothly without major incidents although the vote-counting exceeded the legal deadlines. The Final OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report on these elections on 14 May 2007, while noting some progress, listed a number of deficiencies. A post-election litigation both over procedures and results resulted in 2 rounds of re-runs that forced the final results only to be declared on 8 June 2007. On 11 March and 17 June 2007, 2 parliamentary by-elections were won by the Democratic Party (DP). While they were held in a polarised environment, they were conducted in a mainly calm manner, with irregularities acted upon by the CEC. Another parliamentary by-election in one of Tirana zones has been scheduled for 23 September 2007.

Following the OSCE/ODIHR Final Report, the Assembly created another AHC to complete the reform in view of Parliamentary Elections due in 2009. The Presidential election process that began in June 2007 limited the chance for substantive progress. The AHC met twice and inconclusively discussed some key reform issues before its mandate expired during the Assembly recess in August 2007. The AHC is likely to resume in September 2007 with the apparent intention to first consider the electoral system.

Another political highlight has been the Presidential Election process consisting of up to 5 voting rounds within one month before the end of the mandate of the incumbent President. By the end of June 2007, a lack of a qualified majority (84 votes) resulted in the first 2 voting meetings (having a questionable quorum) failing to see a candidate getting elected. The Opposition then boycotted a third meeting in reaction to the Ruling Majority linking a deal to the dismissal of the General Prosecutor (GP) - sought by the Government since autumn 2005. With the Assembly agreeing on how to account for the voting meetings, the second undisputed voting round proper round took place on 10 July 2007, yet with the

Opposition again boycotting the process. On 14 July 2007, the third round saw the elimination of 1 of the 2 Opposition candidates from the race with most Opposition MPs again absent. In the fourth round, on 20 July 2007, the votes of six opposition MPs allowed the Ruling Majority's candidate, Bamir Topi to receive 85 votes, with the margin of 1 vote above the qualified majority. The Presidential Election process did not entail any external facilitation which hopefully marks the departure from the past practices.

In the field of the media, following a political agreement of late August 2006, the Assembly adopted legislation that increased the membership of the National Council of Radio and Television (NCRT) and the Steering Council of the Albanian Radio and Television (SCART). On 28 May 2007, the Assembly passed a law on digital broadcasting. The Law was not signed by the President, however, entered into force (due to the expiry of the legal deadline for a President's action). Although the Law was commended both by the European Commission (EC) and the CoE, the NCRT's ability to implement the Law without an updated analogue frequency plan, remains a concern. A comprehensive review of the electronic media law has been launched with international assistance.

In May 2007, the NCRT began a campaign to shut down illegal transmitters of regional operators (that had been broadcasting beyond their authorised area for years), however without taking action on the operators holding a nation-wide licence that fail to meet the required terms. The operators concerned accused the NCRT of adopting a selective approach focused mainly on those media critical of the Government. Another media-related controversy arose when a leading media group - known for its non-licensed digital broadcasting - was targeted with tax inspections and was later fined some 11 million EUR for tax evasion. Part of the media community and the Opposition protested, the latter also alleging the authorities of a political bias. The Government justified the move by the need for vigorous action against illicit broadcasting and tax evasion. The period has also brought about major changes in the ownership of particularly the electronic media, some not being sufficiently transparent and being followed by investigations or litigation by parties.

On judicial reform, the most visible issue has been the possible replacement of General Prosecutor, T. Sollaku, who has been long accused by the Ruling Majority of failing to prosecute and of even protecting criminals. On 25 July 2006, the Assembly voted to recommend his dismissal to the President, following a disputed Inquiry Committee. The Opposition boycotted the vote, seeing the case as politically motivated and beset with technical irregularities. On 13 October 2006, President Moisiu vetoed the motion saying the case was unproven. Since the election of Bamir Topi as President, calls to replace the General Prosecutor have resurfaced, either through his resignation, dismissal or by the expiry of his mandate. In late July 2007, the representatives of the Government and the Ruling Coalition called for reopening of the files on the crimes committed during the unrest of 1997; the first arrests and indictments then followed. The Opposition have raised concerns that the investigation will be politically motivated and used to deflect attention from the energy crisis and other alleged failures of the Government.

Important amendments to the Law on State Police were adopted by the Assembly on 4 June 2007. These were prepared with international assistance and laid out standards for management, administrative proceedings, community policing and provided a basis for a sweeping restructuring and a reduction of political interference. The Opposition boycotted the Assembly vote, seeing the new law as harmful to the State Police. A restructuring

resulted in some 800 job cuts in July 2007. The Opposition said that this was part of a scheme to politicise the 9,700 uniformed Police corps. A deficit in transparency of recruitment and dismissals persists. A number of experienced personnel (many trained by international police missions), were replaced by those with little known experience. Yet, in late July 2007, the Government admitted that those dismissed may be re-hired within the police force.

In the fight against corruption, while there have been some visible results in prosecuting corrupt behaviour in public life, there have actually been only a few high profile indictments. This, the Ruling Majority strongly claims, has been due to the inaction of the current General Prosecutor. In combating trafficking in human beings, drugs or weapons, the number of arrests and seizures tends to increase. In fighting domestic illegal drug cultivation, the Police have reported greater seizures of cannabis plants. The actual effect of other anti-drug trafficking measures previously taken, such as the ban of speedboats remain to be conclusively assessed.

On property reform, the Government has moved ahead over the reporting period. In July 2006, the Assembly passed amendments to the Law on Restitution and Compensation of Property that increased the area of agricultural land available for restitution, created a compensation fund, dissolved the former State Committee on Restitution and Compensation of Property (SCRCP) and created the Property Restitution and Compensation Agency (PRCA). The restitution and compensation law was amended in November 2006 allowing the PRCA (as the successor to the SCRCP) to review unresolved appeals lodged against decisions issued by the SCRCP.

The Law on Legalisation, Urban Planning and Integration of Unauthorised Buildings of April 2006 began to be implemented with a higher than expected turnout of legalisation requests. Amendments to this Law were decided by the Government in June 2007, with some deadlines and procedures of the legalisation process adjusted. In July 2007, the Agency for Legalisation, Urbanisation and Integration of Informal Zones (ALUIZNI) and the Immovable Property Registration Office (IPRO) agreed to co-ordinate the legalisation and registration of immovable property. The restitution and compensation process is yet to benefit from legalisation as the creation of a physical restitution fund requires the completion of an inventory of state immovable property and the financial compensation fund has to be financially supported with legalisation fees. The fact that no single legalisation request (out of more than 200,000 filed) has been processed is, according to the Government, due to the protracted local government election period. Visible demonstrative demolitions of a number of illegal buildings were also carried out along coastal areas. A nation-wide aerial mapping operation was prepared in late 2006 and launched in 2007 that is still ongoing.

On economic reform, the Government launched radical changes of taxation legislation – it halved the income tax liability in the middle of fiscal year 2007 and moved towards a flat income tax rate in 2008. As of 1 August 2007, employees's salaries are taxed at a flat rate of ten per cent, both in the public and private sector. One of the political controversies arose over the amendments to the Law "On Taxation Procedures" adopted by the Assembly in April 2007 that required businesses to pre-pay a certain percentage of fines prior to appealing taxation administration decisions. The Opposition objected to the potential for a politically selective penalisation of businesses and the President returned the Law to the Assembly for a review questioning its conformity with the Constitution and

the right to a fair legal process. In June 2007, the Assembly decided to re-approve the Law.

3. SECURITY CO-OPERATION

The Presence continued to assist the Albanian State and Border police, focusing on training in its principal planned projects but also responding to the demand for support both from central and regional levels.

3.1. State Police

Legislative consultancy and advice, jointly with the police assistance missions of the EU (PAMECA) and the US International Criminal Investigative Assistance Training Programme (ICITAP), was provided on the State Police Law and restructuring of the Police throughout the reporting period. The Presence printed 2,000 copies of the new law for the training of the State Police in the 12 Police Directorates.

The Presence supported the State Police in pursuing its strategy to combat cannabis sativa cultivation. From April to June 2006, public debates brought together those affected and information material and television spots were produced to increase awareness. With the Shkodra Police and a local branch of the NGO "Malteser", the Presence launched a beach rescue project at Velepoje Beach in June 2006. By the end of the project in September 2006, there were a total of 21 interventions with 20 persons rescued. In August 2006, the Presence held seminars in Vlora for border police and regional organized crime departments on the prosecution of trafficking in human beings cases without the victim's testimony with the Strategic Police Matters Unit (SPMU).

In late November 2006, the Presence and the Turkish Police Institute provided police training on the management of investigations in the trafficking of illicit drugs. In April 2007, the Presence began a project to raise the capacity of the State Police in interviewing and investigation techniques. This project helped develop the curriculum at the Police Academy and an international expert helped train police directorates. The training was developed with PAMECA, ICITAP and the Police Academy.

The Presence supported 3 road safety awareness projects. The first was during the National Road Safety Awareness Week, in November 2006. The project was run with the Police, Ministries, PAMECA and local NGOs. The Presence printed 1,600 road safety booklets that were distributed by the State Police and where 25,000 vehicle drivers were contacted and handed leaflets. The second activity was during UN International Road Safety Week in April 2007, where the Presence provided printed material to raise youth awareness on the use of seat belts and the dangers of drinking and driving. Along with local NGOs, the Presence trained 200 traffic police on providing first-aid to victims of traffic accidents and 60 first-aid kits were provided for traffic police vehicles. The third road safety activity was an information campaign in July 2007 at border crossing points to remind incoming tourists to obey the traffic law.

3.2. Border Police

In 2006, the Presence completed a solar panel project in order to provide uninterrupted electricity to Police Departments and border crossing posts. In total, the Presence installed and donated 8 solar power generators from an Extra-Budgetary (ExB) project. Following

the past donation of UHF radios, radio repeaters, solar generators and computer equipment to the State Police, the Presence also donated border monitoring equipment including the high quality night vision equipment freed up by the closure of the Bordering Monitoring Operation (BMO) Mission in Georgia. Further supply of equipment was made possible through a US donation of computers to increase efficiency of border police operations, in particular to assist in police reporting. In addition, the Presence is working with the Director of the Border Police to develop a deployable Border Support Unit (BSU) and, at their request, a consultant will shortly arrive in Albania to conduct a feasibility assessment.

In January 2007, the Presence along with PAMECA and Kosovo Force (KFOR) facilitated the transportation of 2 office containers to the Border Crossing Point (BCP) in Shistavec and Orgjost. After the failure with the lift, the Presence negotiated with KFOR MNB South providing a temporary container for Shistavec on 26 January 2007. Later on, this container was replaced in March/April. For the Border Crossing Point (BCP) in Orgjost, a container was airlifted in by KFOR through an operation on 11 May 2007. The original two office containers were also re-deployed to the BCP at Qafe Morina to augment the facilities there.

At the request of the State Border and Migration Police, the Presence launched a Police Mounted Patrol Pilot Project in May 2007 in Shkodra that provided for training in the use of horses for border patrolling.

During the reporting period, cross border co-operation meetings were conducted with Kosovo/Serbia, Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (fYRoM). 8 trilateral meetings between Albania, Kosovo/Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were facilitated in September 2006 in Kukes with the participation of local government and OSCE representatives.

On the border with the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, a workshop was held with the participation of senior Border Police experts from both countries. The meeting focused on the current border management co-operation strategies and explored new modalities of co-operation in order to combat cross border organized crime. This event was followed up with a co-ordination meeting between the Presence and the OSCE Spillover Mission to Skopje. On the border with the Republic of Montenegro, 3 meetings were held in Shkodra, Podgorica and Tirana by the Presence and the Mission in Montenegro respectively. As a result of these meetings, 2 documents were drafted and sent to the Ministries of Justice in both countries for final approval. One regional Cross Border Meeting was also facilitated with regional Border Police officials in Shkodra.

The Presence continued with the facilitation of the regular joint-border cooperation meetings (JBCM) with Kosovo/Serbia. Bi-weekly meetings were held at Morini–Vrbnica, Qafa Prushi and Qafa Morina Border Crossing points. 62 Bi-weekly meetings were facilitated, with the participation of security and custom officials, Kosovo Police Service (KPS), KFOR, Albanian State Police and UNMIK. Similar monthly meetings were held at Gjakova, Dragash and Prizren (Kosovo/Serbia) and Kukes Regional Police Directorate. As a result of Presence-facilitated JBCM meetings between KFOR, KPS and Albanian Border Police, synchronized border patrols were inaugurated on 11 May 2007 on the Albanian side of the Krushevo/Shishtavec pedestrian BCP. A Cross- Border Community Co-operation meeting was facilitated between the communities of Pakisht (Albania) and Krstac/ Dragash (Kosovo/Serbia) to encourage co-operation and to take joint preventive

measures ahead of the summer season against illegal border activity. Both communities agreed to have regular monthly meetings in the summer season.

4. GOVERNANCE IN ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

This programme focuses on governance in economic and environmental issues, including municipal governance and territorial administrative reform, property reform, anti-money-laundering and non-police aspects of anti-trafficking.

4.1. Property reform

In 2006, the Presence consulted with the Government and its agencies on a strategy to link the first registration of property, the restitution and compensation and the legalisation of informal properties. In 2007 the Presence suggested how these processes could be linked to achieve simultaneous legalisation and registration of property and how the data of the Property Restitution and Compensation Agency (PRCA) could be managed in order that the restitution process could benefit from the revenues generated through the legalisation process, as foreseen by the law.

In 2007 the Presence is in the process of concluding its support to the first property registration process in co-operation with the Immovable Property Registration Office (IPRO) that resulted in the first registration of 24,000 properties in Vlora and Tirana. The Presence also conducted residual work in the 2 largest informal settlements to develop a work plan to assist the Government to achieve a co-ordinated registration and legalisation of property. The Pilot project has sought to register and legalise over 9,000 properties in 2007. In summer 2007, the Presence and the PRCA completed a project to digitalise claims data submitted for restitution and compensation since 1994. During this project, over 43,000 claim files were digitalised and the database has, for the first time, provided the PRCA with the ability to provide statistics regarding the claims process. The database will assist the Government to better manage the restitution and compensation process and harmonise it with the legalisation.

4.2. Regional reform

On 29 May 2007, the Presence, in cooperation with the CoE and the MoI, held a roundtable on the reform of regional government. The Presence and the CoE reviewed relevant models to offer participants options to pursue in the framework of regional administrative reform. On that basis, the Presence will assist the Government to prepare a regional reform blueprint in accordance with the National Work Programme. The Presence implemented projects with Mayors in 14 Local Government Units (LGUs) to enhance strategic planning, transparency and service delivery. In late July 2007, the Presence held an inaugural event to support the 9 women Mayors of the country issued from the February 2007 elections. The programme provides a platform for current and former Albanian women mayors to share experiences with other women leaders for more visibility and empowerment for women in public affairs and also for training and material support, the latter being prepared for later in 2007.

4.3. Good governance

In April 2007, the Presence held a Regional Anti-Corruption conference funded by OSCE and the Stability Pact Anti-Corruption Initiative (SPAI) for public and civil society officials from countries in the region. The Presence worked to promote transparency and

good governance in local government by offering seminars on the prevention of conflict of interest to 129 newly elected Mayors. The Presence supported the Directorate of the Fight against Money Laundering to improve the efficiency of data gathering through the dissemination of OSCE designed anti-money laundering software to an additional 12 second tier banks. The software is now operational in 17 second tier banks, thus increasing the efficiency of data sharing from banks to the Financial Investigative Unit (FIU). The Presence also provided support to the FIU by donating equipment, providing ORACLE training to its staff to improve administration of the database as well as providing an expert to conduct a needs assessment. With the Office of the Co-ordinator of Economic and Environmental Activities (OCEEA), the Presence held six workshops and one regional conference focusing on the Global Code of Conduct for protection of children from sexual exploitation in tourism as a prevention measure.

4.4. Environmental reform

In 2006 a MoU was signed with the Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Water Administration (MoEFWA) on the implementation of the Aarhus Convention. An Aarhus Information Centre (AIC) was opened in Tirana with equipment donated by the Presence through an Environment and Security Initiative (ENVSEC) grant. A further Aarhus information centre is currently being opened in Shkodra under a local Presence initiative. The AIC has already held a meeting for Government authorities and NGOs regarding the future of an urban landfill in Tirana. A grant was given to a local NGO in Saranda in co-operation with the Municipality for addressing Solid Waste Management issues. A citizen/Municipality planning group was formed to ensure public participation in sanitation issues. The project was linked to a national campaign run with the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to promote awareness on waste recycling. Support was provided to the Ministry of Public Works, Transport and Telecommunication (MoPWTT) and LGUs with events in Shkodra and Gjirokastra aimed at developing official and environmentally friendly landfill sites.

4.5. Anti-trafficking

Protection of the human rights of victims of trafficking and assisting their social reintegration remained one of the Presence priorities. To achieve this, with support from the Austrian Development Corporation, the Presence trained fifteen girls and women victims of trafficking on micro-enterprise development and disbursed micro-credits, initially for 3 of them. To improve the protection of victims of trafficking, the Presence supported the Government's efforts to draft the standards of social protection for victims of this type of criminality, to be followed by the publication and dissemination of the documents. To improve data collection and reporting, the Presence supported the Government in the establishment of a database on trafficking cases.

To enhance cross-border co-operation on anti-trafficking issues, the Presence facilitated a meeting between authorities from Albanian and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in order to discuss a draft protocol of co-operation was discussed. The Presence supported a coalition of NGO's to conduct an awareness raising campaign against the exploitation of children for begging. As part of the ODIHR/OCEEA Women's Economic Empowerment project, the Presence led an analysis of labour market needs and employment opportunities for women in Northern Albania. In July 2007, the Presence held seminars on Legal Education and Rights Protection, access to Justice of Trafficked persons and vulnerable groups with Roma as the target group.

5. HUMAN DIMENSION

The Presence focused on legislative and judicial reform, rule of law, human rights, including gender equality and the rights of the disabled, electoral reform, including registration of voters/citizens, parliamentary capacity-building, work with the civil society and the development of the media.

5.1 Judicial reform

In November 2006, the Presence published an analysis of the Criminal Justice System and made recommendations for enhancing the system's fairness and efficiency. The Presence and CoE led seminars for criminal justice professionals on the best practices in the area of arrest and pre-trial detention. In March-April 2007, the Presence and CoE, the Albanian School of Magistrates and a local NGO, held seminars for lawyers and police on the new Domestic Violence Law. In May 2007 the Presence and PAMECA held a workshop on Witness Protection led by experts from the German Protection Unit that was attended by Albanian Directorate for the Protection of Witnesses and Justice Collaborators officials.

The Presence and the World Health Organization (WHO) provided seminars on the rights of mentally ill patients for law enforcement officials in 3 regions. The Presence supported the Civil Service Commission (CSC) by leading a visit to the Institute of Public Administration of Ireland and financially contributed to the maintenance of their webpage. In January 2007, the Presence edited a UK guidebook on the use of DNA in criminal prosecution for training of legal professionals. The Presence supported the drafting of amendments to the 2004 Law on the Protection of Witnesses and Justice Collaborators.

5.2 Human Rights

The Presence has funded the publication of the National Strategy for Improving Roma Living Conditions that was distributed to LGUs, has trained teachers from pilot areas to collect data in relation to Roma children's school attendance and has funded 2 projects on increasing the awareness on the right of voting within the Roma community. With the Albanian People's Advocate (Ombudsperson) and the French Embassy in Tirana, the Presence implemented a Right to Information project that consisted of producing publicity on the rights to access official documents, environmental issues, and the rights of people held in detention. The Presence trained High Inspectorate of Labour senior staff on health and safety at work issues. The Presence continued to chair donor/government co-ordination meetings on Roma rights and Prison reform issues.

5.3 Electoral reform

The Presence supported the Government in preparing voter lists for the Local Government Elections by drafting instructions and leading workshops to improve the legal framework. In December 2006, the Presence donated 100 computers for use in voter registration. The Presence supported the Assembly AHC in drafting voter list provisions, offering equipment and secretarial support. The Presence supported the Central Election Commission's (CEC) training programme and contributed to increasing capacities in their regional offices and also by the printing of the Electoral Code, polling station and counting manuals. It also assisted with public information campaigns on voter awareness, anti-family and proxy voting and on the use of IDs for voting. The Presence also funded the printing of the polling station and counting manuals for the CEC. With the Albanian Blind Association (ABA), the National Council of People with Disabilities Organizations (NCPDO) and the CEC, the Presence provided voting tools for blind voters in Tirana and

Durres for the local elections. Prior to the local government elections, seminars for the police were held with PAMECA, on the role of the state police in elections and 6,000 police pocketbooks were printed and distributed. At a local level, the Presence, in co-operation with the NNCSDC, ran a series of televised round tables during the municipal elections campaigns bringing together the candidates from the various political parties in a public environment.

5.4 Modernisation of the Address and Civil Registry

Following up on ODIHR recommendations on the February 2007 Local Government Elections, the Presence began a project to assist the Government to create an address system, to modernize its civil registration system in order to also generate reliable voter lists, to improve the legal framework on personal data protection and to create an independent personal data protection authority. In June 2007, the project produced its inception report with a view to having the Government act upon the findings. The project is planned to continue until the end of 2009, and is implemented with major funding from the EC, an additional contribution from the United States, as well as in close co-operation with the CoE and Statistics Norway.

5.5 Parliamentary capacity-building

The Presence continued to work with the Assembly through its project on "Modernizing the Capacities of the Assembly of the Republic of Albania", the first phase of which ended in 2006. The Presence offered media training to MPs and senior staff in order to improve capacities on media relations and public outreach. The third and final expert briefing for the Assembly's Committee on EU Integration and the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) process took place in co-operation with a local NGO. The Presence supported the purchase of 2 X-Ray Scanners that facilitated the entry of visitors and provide needed security and helped the Assembly in holding training for MP Constituency offices. From late 2006, a new 3-year project proposal was negotiated with the Assembly and the donor that was finally agreed and signed in June 2007. In line with the Assembly's own programme, the project will provide the assistance in: management and decision-making structures, committee functioning, constituency outreach, access for the public of parliamentary information, library resources, and an internship programme. This project began in 2007 and will run until December 2009.

5.6 Media

With the Albanian Media Institute, the USAID, the code of ethics for journalists of 1996 was updated and a Council on Media Ethics was created. The Council comprises of academics, producers, writers and media experts. The Presence supported the printing and distribution of 2,000 copies of the Code and contracted an international expert to provide assistance. Upon request of the Assembly Media Committee, the Presence provided information on how a qualified majority voting is used in regulatory media boards in other European countries. To assist the Committee, the Presence and the OSCE Representative of the Freedom of the Media (RFoM) led a study visit for Albanian MPs on media standards to Vienna in January 2007. The Presence also maintained contacts with domestic actors and international partners regarding the Digital Broadcasting Law which the Assembly adopted on 28 May 2007 and provided informal comments in April. The Presence also concluded the project "Training Local Media on Professional Standards and Promoting Transparency pertaining to Access to Information Law" funded by the Swiss Government and the Dutch organization Press Now. 20 local TV stations were trained and the 5 best local TV stations were presented with awards.

5.7 Civil society

The Presence continued to support the Civil Society Development Centres (CSDCs) pursuing a multi-year plan for their nationalisation. The CSDCs were registered in 2006 as an independent national network to provide capacity-building and services to civil society. Despite common features, local CSDC profiles vary: civil society networks in Kukës and Shkodra monitored the performance of cleaning companies; the Municipality of Elbasan contracted the local CSDC to run a project to enable citizen participation in the budget process. CSDC Vlora focused on environmental issues and CSDC Shkodra was the local implementing partner for a British Council educational project whilst CSDC Korca represents the local NGO community on the local Housing Commission.

The Presence worked with the Government to support the implementation of the National Strategy on People with Disabilities by providing experts to strengthen the Technical Secretariat, to budget the National Action Plan and to strengthen the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MoLSAEO) capacity to report on the implementation of the Strategy.

5.8 Gender

The Presence supported civil society input into the revision of the 2004 Gender Equality Law. Their package of amendments was conveyed to the Government in April 2007 and is now pending their approval. Since February 2007, the Presence assisted the drafting and consultation process of the National Gender Equality Strategy, through the hiring of experts to assist the Government. Attention to the needs of women groups in northern Albania remained a focus by channelling donor funding to the Kukes Women's Counselling Centre (WCC) until the end of 2006. The WCC (that became an independent body in February 2007) offered support to vulnerable groups of women.

6. FUND ADMINISTRATION UNIT

The Fund Administration Unit (FAU) has continued to support the thematic departments in their work during the reporting period. The move from old to new, better, safer and more economic premises was completed in the reporting period – the operation was carried out in a budget-neutral way. The Common Regulatory Management System (CRMS) is now fully operational. Recruitment of staff has suffered from a decreasing number of seconded candidates of which too many are either unsuitable or inexperienced. The replacement of assets, especially critical and expensive ones such as vehicles and computers, has continued to be a management challenge as funds have been prioritised and focussed on thematic programme delivery.

7. THE WAY AHEAD

The Presence's planning for 2008 takes account of the challenges in the country's domestic reforms and Government priorities. While the thematic scope of the work planned by the Presence is defined by the mandate, the overarching priorities have been identified by the Government: the electoral reform, good governance and judiciary reform. 2008 will be important for Albania as it is the year with no elections scheduled which should allow to focus regular work on the key reforms that are also essential in view of the

Euro-Atlantic integration ambitions of the Government. The next election on the horizon - the Parliamentary Elections of 2009 - makes it compelling for Albania to focus all energies and resources in order to progress tangibly on key reform tasks in the meantime. In some of these, the Presence is expected to assist, both by the mandate and also by the funds made available to it, for its work in support of the reform process.

The provision of OSCE's further expertise and technical support, under ODIHR's lead, to the electoral reform will depend on the content and pace of the debate in the Assembly's electoral reform committee. Should the political actors opt for a change of the electoral system, the task will grow bigger, perhaps critically so, given the deadline posed by the general elections. The necessary minimum will in any case have to entail a follow-up to previous international recommendations, including depoliticising and professionalizing of the electoral administration.

Modernising the registration of citizens and establishing a functioning address system country-wide is now left with less than 2 years remaining until the next general elections. More than half a year since the launching earlier this year of the Presence's assistance project funded by 2.5 Mill Euro from the European Commission, the Government has finalised its own plan and began to allocate specific resources for this effort. With the concrete work only starting now, the bulk of it will have to be done in 2008. The Presence will continue advising and pursuing solutions that are realistic and viable, drawing upon all existing resources in the country, including also on improved inter-agency co-ordination. This will also allow for progress to be made in another of the Government's closely related priority objectives – the issuance of new IDs and passports. Next year will be critical for linking the civil registry modernisation with the ID and passport issuance - thus ensuring the reliability of the identity data that will be an issue in future elections.

Progress in property reform overall hinges upon the legalisation of informal buildings while moving forward and completing the restitution and compensation remains a legal obligation as well as a political necessity. Proper registration of immovable property continues to be a technical prerequisite for the other two property processes. The Presence has advised to synchronise legalisation with first registration and will be ready to further help in replicating and expanding the 2007 pilot exercise. It will also be ready to help with further work on removing restrictions to the property titles already registered and with building the capacity of the national restitution agency.

Given the magnitude of environmental problems of the country, further assistance of the OSCE in public awareness and access to information in pursuing the Aarhus Convention can make a positive difference. The decentralisation of competencies, including water and waste management, opens up room for local action that the Presence will continue to support. Meaningful assistance by the Presence with territorial administrative reform will continue to hinge on the launching of this reform by the Government.

Strengthening the rule of law, will remain one of the cross-cutting purposes of the domestic reforms. The Presence plans further work to help strengthen judicial ethics and improve access to justice, treatment of witnesses and other participants in trials. Human rights, including gender equality and the situation of vulnerable minorities, will remain other areas of assistance. Efficiency of prosecution, including its professional standards and interaction with police and judiciary, improving legislative drafting, including its transparency, will be another objective. Promoting continuity of the civil service and its impartiality and professional standards also remains a planned objective.

The role of the Police in strengthening the rule of law will also be irreplaceable. The Presence's police training work will contribute by focusing on investigation skills and methods and also on land border control. The Presence's police training work and other activities, including e.g. the enforcement aspect of anti-trafficking, will be closely consulted with and complementary to that of other international police missions.

The Albanian media will continue to require more work on both ethical and professional standards. The Presence plans to further assist in both areas and also in regulatory aspects of the transition to digital broadcasting. Albania's civil society will further benefit from the activity of the National Network of Civil Society Development Centres (NNCSDC) established by the Presence in 2004.

E.o.T.