

Vacek: Urgent Agreement on Voter Lists Needed

“I am optimistic about consensus on electoral map”

By Blerina Gjoka

The OSCE Ambassador in Tirana Pavel Vacek said in an interview with Gazeta Shqiptare that he is optimistic that the parties will very soon reach an agreement on the electoral zones. But Vacek says that another problem, that of the voter lists, will arise very soon. He suggests that an agreement is reached urgently in order to significantly improve the voter lists. “This has been one of the key requirements by the OSCE/ODIHR and the relevant recommendations still remain to be implemented.”

With regard to the minority zones, he considers terms such as “ethnically pure” to be dangerous. It reminds you of Yugoslavia, explains Vacek, who adds that “the international standards permit exceptions from general rules on electoral zones when it is justified by the interest of a minority”. And the minority, in this case, is the Greek minority in some zones in the South of the country.

1. Mr. Ambassador, the electoral zone boundaries in Albania showed once again that the Albanian political class failed to find a language of consensus. The deadline for negotiation provided for in the agreement has expired. Will the OSCE take new initiatives to negotiate again with the political parties to reach a final consensus?

It has been clear since 5 February that the participants in the OSCE Presence and Council of Europe-supported Expert Group could not agree on the formula proposed by the Group’s Chairman which would have best met the legal requirements. The Assembly has been made aware of the impossibility of achieving a solution which would fully meet all the legal requirements. Since then, we have been looking for a political compromise which would be considerably farther from the ideal than the one proposed by the Chairman of the Group. The latest informal contacts give us hope that the political parties will be able to agree on a compromise but that will still require more effort.

2. What will be further OSCE role in preparing the elections until they are held?

The OSCE Presence is willing to assist the Albanian institutions in all election preparations. Our role in supporting the election legislation is known and has already been mentioned. The biggest support is provided on the voter registration, thanks to the 800,000 Euro project funded by the European Commission. In that framework, we have been co-operating closely with the Ministry of Local Government and Decentralization on the voters lists and with the Central Election Commission on issues such as training of election staff and the selection of

appropriate venues for the conduct of polling and counting. Besides that, we continue providing technical advice in the interpretation and implementation of the new Electoral Code.

3. Mr. Vacek, how much important do you consider the next elections to be for our country's future?

I would dislike to turn this into a cliché, but this election is a test. Finally, Albania should be able to have elections which meet international standards, which will be orderly and professionally organized, which will be decided by the voters only and not by manipulations.

4. How much accurate is the term 'ethnically pure' used by politicians referring to the proposal for creation of an electoral zone in the south of the country, which mainly consists of the Greek minority?

First of all, the use of such notion, which has ominous connotations of the tragedy of the former Yugoslavia, is inappropriate, even malevolent in this debate and should be avoided. The process of redrawing electoral constituency boundaries is certainly not helped or simplified by the use of such manipulative language. Several options regarding the drawing of the zone boundaries in the area inhabited by the Greek minority have been discussed, and now the challenge remains to select one which is in compliance with international standards, as well as acceptable for the Albanian political parties. What remains undisputable is that international standards permit exceptions from general rules on electoral zones when it is justified by the interest of a minority.

5. What are the issues on which consensus among the Albanian political parties regarding the election process should be reached?

First of all, it is necessary that political parties finally agree on the redrawing of the electoral zone boundaries. Valuable time for electoral preparation has been lost with every additional day spent on partisan debate on this issue – this is putting into jeopardy the continuation of electoral preparations. The ability to reach a speedy and reasonable compromise between the major political parties on this issue is the immediate challenge for the Albanian political representation.

Further, an agreement between the responsible Albanian institutions urgently needs to be reached on the preparation of significantly improved voters lists. This has been one of the key requirements by the OSCE/ODIHR and the relevant recommendations still remain to be implemented. When the legislation leaves room for uncertainty over competencies, one should look for most efficient and not only for the easiest solutions – this relates namely to assisting the mayors in handling the data necessary for turning the preliminary voters lists into the final ones.

In more general terms, I want to repeat that the good will by political parties resulting in reasonable, consensual solutions will be the key to the success of the upcoming elections. No commissions, institutions or other bodies can work properly, if not governed by the spirit of professionalism and respect for the rule of law. Political forces should not only adhere to their commitments, but also exercise active influence on their supporters and associates in this regard.