

TRANSCRIPT OF HEAD OF PRESENCE'S INTERVIEW WITH *NEWS 24 TV*

Interviewed by Ergys Gjençaj, broadcast on 17 March 2021

Mr. Ambassador, although you have been in Albania for only several months now, I think you have already an opinion on many things. Since Albanians are very much interested into politics and into the findings of the internationals, who are considered as an arbiter, what is your opinion of the Albanian political class which is part of many conflicts?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Thank you, first of all, for showing interest in my opinion and my analysis. Actually, I do not consider myself an arbiter, certainly not a protagonist. Let me underline that Albanians, Albanian citizens are in their own country the protagonists and the arbiters. And I strongly encourage them to go and cast their vote on 25 April, because through the elections on 25 April they will exercise their fundamental constitutional right. I think that myself I am an active observer and a partner of Albania, of Albanian institutions, through the menu of the activities put in place by the OSCE Presence. No one can deny that there is a very high significant degree of dynamism in the Albanian political life, not necessarily a very healthy one, but again, it is on the Albanians to express their opinion and judgement on 25 April.

Albanian political actors will lock horns on 25 April. How do you see these elections? Do you expect an escalation of the political tension in the country since both sides want either to come into or remain in power?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Elections will be a very important appointment. This is what all the political leaders and forces have repeatedly said here in Albania. What matters more is the substance, is the content of the political programmes, since Albania will have a number of challenges that need to be addressed also in the future. I think that political tensions are already high enough and do not need a further escalation.

These will be the most expensive elections in Albania, because of the biometric identification of voters and the pilot project on electronic voting and counting. To what extend to you think technology will help meeting elections' standards?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Yes, you are right. These will be very expensive elections. But I think it is a good investment. It is an investment in democracy. Technology can certainly be particularly helpful in addressing a number of shortcomings that we have seen in the past, for instance in the registration of the voters, in the identification of voters, in avoiding family or multiple voting. What is key now is that citizens, voters, are well-informed about the technology being introduced in the electoral process, that citizens are informed about how the new devices work, how the privacy of voters is protected. This is also part of the information campaign to which the OSCE Presence is trying to do its best to contribute to.

Vote-buying had a special place in the OSCE/ODIHR report on the last parliamentary elections in 2017. Do you think that there has been done enough to fight this phenomenon? To what extend will these phenomenon be at the focus of the election observers?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Honestly, changes in the legislation introduced last year are very important: changes introduced in the Electoral Code, changes introduced in other pieces of legislation starting from the Criminal Code. They have inserted, as you know, stricter rules to deal with the vote-selling and the vote-buying. These include, for instance, the submission to

the CEC by each party chair of an official declaration stating that the party will refrain from illegal activities. And there are other important provisions in this sense: there is an increased role of the police around the polling stations, there are cameras that will monitor the activities within the polling station, there is a role for SPAK. This phenomenon will certainly be in the focus of the ODIHR observers. Actually, ODIHR has repeatedly reaffirmed the importance also of a swift investigation and prosecution of eventual allegations of frauds or vote-buying or vote-selling phenomena. The Presence itself and the OSCE continue observing closely a number of developments in the court cases. I will just mention one, and it is the one taking place in the Dibra district court.

Mr. Ambassador, in order to clean the politics from people with a criminal past or people connected to crime, Albania has approved the decriminalization law, which has given some results. Do you think the law alone is enough to clean the Albanian politics of these individuals? Is the law only enough to have clean candidate lists?

Ambassador Del Monaco: The existence of the law is primordial and paramount, but it is not enough to prevent the occurrence of wrongdoings, neither in Albania nor anywhere else in the world. Actually, penal law exists because before penal law there is another law that might be infringed and this is the role of the penal law and the judiciary system. What I have already had the opportunity to say recently is that what I think is needed is a collective and a concerted effort from all the parties involved – political leaders, political parties, institutions, CEC, judiciary, yourself media, civil society – in order to make sure that the law is fully implemented and the risks of wrongdoings minimized. As Presence we organized in December last a specific event on the implementation of the decriminalization law with the representatives from political forces and institutions, and I think that the main takeaway was this unanimous consensus around the importance of clean electoral lists.

Mr. Ambassador, the politicians agreed to have 25 April elections administered by political parties' representatives, because of lack of trust. When do you think Albania will have non-political election administrators, and what conditions need to be fulfilled for a depoliticization of the election administration?

Ambassador Del Monaco: I think that this issue was already solved within the frame of the 5 June agreement. The solution found by all the political forces is that the next general elections, so in 2025, will be administered by independent commissioners, so there will be a full depoliticization of the electoral process. For the time being we have the system that is in place. What is important is that the commissioners continue to work professionally, in an unbiased manner. I would maybe take this opportunity to add that even ODIHR stressed the importance not only of having a depoliticized electoral process, but also a depoliticized public administration. That would set a fantastic ground also to have a fully depoliticized electoral process in the country.

Experience shows that election results in Albania are very much delayed because the counting process is a real marathon. What would you suggest for a speedier process? Could the counting of votes in voting centres be a solution or the solution?

Ambassador Del Monaco: I think that the latter is a decision that is on the Albanian politicians to make. As far as I understand in the past Albania used to have a decentralized counting system and then a decision was taken to centralize it because of a number of alleged irregularities. So, this is a decision that has pros and cons and belongs only to the political forces. This time we

have the novelty of the preferential voting, and this will translate in a lengthy process of vote counting, because first the commissions will start from counting the party votes and then they will proceed with counting the individual votes. It is I think very important that the CEC establishes a very clear and swift logistical infrastructure and framework, and it is also important to have the full co-operation of the representatives of the political forces and of the candidates themselves the day of the voting, because the context in which the votes will be counted will be very important to determine the speed of the entire process.

Do you see possible the out-of-country voting for the 25 April elections?

Ambassador Del Monaco: We all read in the news days ago what Mr. Celibashi said, and to my understanding it is particularly difficult that the out-of-country voting will be tested this time in the Albanian elections.

Mr. Ambassador, of course elections get most of the attention, but they are not the only concern in Albania. Media situation remains a concern as well. There has been a huge debate on a media law drafted by the government, which was also criticized by the OSCE. What is your comment?

Ambassador Del Monaco: I think that now we should remain focused on the preparation of the general elections in Albania. Having said so, media is another fundamental topic and, as you know there is no mystery because the opinions and statements of both the OSCE and the Representative for the Freedom of the Media of the OSCE were made public, it is very transparent. The fact that the draft media law is still pending in parliament offers a tremendous opportunity to improve it.

The OSCE in Albania has also helped with the approval of the justice reform. Do you think we should be enthusiastic about the so-far results or shall we have the feet on the ground? Because all the glitters is not gold.

Ambassador Del Monaco: I am a rational enthusiast, which means that I am an enthusiast but I keep my feet well on the ground. A number of important achievements and results were obtained by Albania in the recent past. We all celebrated very loudly the return to function of the Constitutional Court. Now it is time to remain focused on the next steps: on the High Court, on the functionality and the efficiency of the judiciary machine.

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