



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

HEAD OF PRESENCE'S INTERVIEW WITH RTSH PUBLIC BROADCASTER

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Interviewed by Lutfi Dervishi, host of "Përballë" (Face to face) programme

Q: Albania had the Chairpersonship of the OSCE for 2020. What is your assessment of this Chairpersonship considering that 2020 was a very unusual year because of Covid_19?

Ambassador Del Monaco: The Albanian Chairpersonship-in-Office was a very productive one despite the difficult circumstances and, as you said, the very unusual year. Actually, I would say in a very difficult year because of Covid. Covid hit hard, continues to hit hard, and I would take this opportunity to express my condolences to all the Albanians who lost a loved person because of this pandemic.

Dialogue and continued engagement epitomized the Albanian Chairpersonship-in-Office last year. That was clearly reflected in the level of Ministerial Council that took place in Tirana last 3 December. I will mention here the 8 decisions adopted, the 2 Declarations and 1 Ministerial statement. It was a very generous result. Let me also underline that the diplomatic skills of Albania made it possible to appoint the new Secretary General of the OSCE and the heads of the three independent institutions of the OSCE. Albania also contributed to further strengthening the fight against corruption through digitalization and increased transparency, attaching importance also to other achievements that I will not mention because the list would be very long. But just to drop one further example: transnational threats. I would underscore another point which in my opinion is very important: it's the contribution of the Albanian Chairpersonship-in-Office to good neighbourly relations. Because Albania facilitated the collective decision to entrust North Macedonia as chair of the OSCE for 2023. The idea is that no matter how small or big a country is we all must contribute the European security order and this is what North Macedonia will do in 2023. One final achievement is related to the internal functioning of the Organization. Despite the disruption brought by Covid, the OSCE managed to function as smoothly throughout 2020.

Q: With this long list of achievements perhaps the right question would be if we did not have Covid we could have done miracles. Anyway, now the Chairmanship is in the hands of Sweden. What are the main priorities of the OSCE Swedish Chairpersonship?

Ambassador Del Monaco: As announced by the Sweden's Foreign Affairs Minister, Stockholm will attach priorities to further contributing to the European security order; upholding the OSCE concept of comprehensive security, and contributing to resolving conflicts in the OSCE area; enhancing gender equality also through the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and promoting civil society representatives in security discussions. The underlying idea is that political and economic agenda, political and economic security, human rights, democracy, they are all interrelated and intertwined. And the messages put forward by the Chairpersonship-in-Office reinforce the idea that a multilateral approach to common challenges is paramount.

Q: If we go back to challenges in Albania, what would be the main focus of your work?

Ambassador Del Monaco: The Presence will do its best to try to translate to the local level, so here in Albania, the priorities set by the Swedish Chairpersonship-in-Office. We will tackle security-related issues, of course, starting from transnational threats. Let me remind you that Covid is the poster child of a transnational threat. Even in the field of measures in support of Albania during the pandemic, the Presence played a very active role, and the credit goes to my predecessor and my colleagues, as I was not here yet.

I would like to also touch on the importance of the dimension of governance as a way of tackling environmental security and corruption. And then there are the areas in which the Presence is recognized for its leading role: you mentioned earlier the election process, the media, equality of rights between men and women, our long-standing co-operation with the National Assembly of Albania and the now functioning Constitutional Court. In my vision, one priority will need to be attached also to youth mainstreaming, and wherever possible, wherever it will make sense also to a regional component. These are lots of high-flying priorities, that all translate into programmes that will make available to Albania. Our programmes, our ideas, our objectives are the fruit of the daily partnership hand in hand with Albania, Albanian institutions, media, civil society.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, we will talk about these priorities that you mentioned: electoral process, media, justice, Constitutional Court. Elections are the *Achilles' heel* of Albanian democracy – when elections go well, everything goes well, and when elections go bad the country suffers, there has been regress in many fields. Do you see any danger for the 25 April elections that now are very near?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Thank you for these very important question. I will respond it very straightforwardly. Since I took office here in Tirana, I have not noticed any development that would warrant speaking of a danger per se. Of course there are challenges, but challenges belong to every electoral process, especially when a country is implementing for the first time new rules and time is not necessarily very long until to E-day. The Presence rolled up its sleeves. We work hand in hand with the Central Elections Commission, in a very fluid manner. We co-operate with the Albanian State Police. And, as you've seen, we have already started a full array of initiatives, starting from the training of the police that will cascade on 6,000 agents. The other day, we celebrated together the Global Election Day with Commissioner Celibashi, focused on youth, and we have in the pipe a number of other initiatives, stretching from information activities to vulnerable groups, youth, training for the media. I do not see for the time being, nothing that enables me to speak on any possible danger. Then, as you know, the assessment of the election, the institution that will accompany closely Albania through elections, is ODIHR, the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. For my part, I can only trust that we are preparing for a joyful celebration of the elections, trusting that it will also mark the end of the political campaign.

Q: You mentioned that these elections will take place with new rules deriving from the 5 June agreement or the constitutional changes. There is talk about the use of technology, emigrant vote and stricter rules regarding the usage of human resources by the administration. From what you said it seems to me that you are the only optimistic person in Tirana that elections will go well?

Ambassador Del Monaco: I am an optimistic person by nature. Were I not an optimistic person I would not be in this job. In the Middle Age a number of philosophers thought that the world we are living is a perfect world. The great German philosopher Leibniz brought to

another upper level of sophistication the notion that our world is perfect. More down to earth I am an optimistic person because I trust the Albanian democracy and I strongly believe that democracy is the perfect system, a perfect system is always perfectible. Now we have new rules, and that is a fact. Elections are close, and that is another fact. But as far as I can see, the Central Election Commission is working very hard, and there is a general awareness of the close deadline that we have until 25 April and that reinforce my natural optimistic instinct. I would maybe take this opportunity to add that the full implementation of the new provisions of the Electoral Code will also require a collective effort. An effort from the institutions, an effort from the political leaders, and even an effort from each and single citizen because those who have IDs already expired need to hurry up and ask for a new identification card.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, you are the 9th OSCE ambassador in Tirana. As a journalist I have followed nine parliamentary elections. And always before the campaign there is an optimism, especially by the internationals, that things will go well. You have had intensive meetings recently with the State Election Commissioner, with the General Director of the Police and with other actors. What do you think is the biggest challenge for the institutions in these elections?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Time. Time is probably one of the major challenges, because you need to make sure that the new electoral provisions are applied in a relatively short timeframe. And then there are for sure a number of other challenges. One is the out-of-country voting, and I have a lot of experience with that because in my previous capacity I had the opportunity in organizing in the countries where I was serving, elections for the Italians abroad. And I know first-hand how complex that can be. Even the application of technology is a challenge per se for the new elections. And I renew, I add my voice to the voice of the Albanian authorities, political leaders and my colleagues from the international community calling on the Albanians to quickly renew their ID cards. That is absolutely fundamental. So I would say that time and funding at the disposal of the Central Election Commission are the key points that will need to be addressed till the end.

Q: The Presence is a long-term partner of the CEC, but with the changes in the Constitution and the Electoral Code, the CEC structure and competencies have changed. What is the assistance that you are currently providing to the CEC?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Thank you for recalling the longstanding co-operation that the Presence has with the Central Election Commission. We have started the distribution of a donation to CEC of 1,000 copies of the Electoral Code. I handed over personally the first copy to Commissioner Celibashi the other day. We organized together this Global Election Day focusing on younger people, conveying the message that the active political engagement of younger people is an asset for the Albanian democracy. We will have a number of outreach events, TV spots, information circulated on the internet and social media. We will address also vulnerable groups, impaired vision people, minorities. And in parallel to that we are working hand in hand, as I mentioned before, with the Albanian State Police and the media

Q: After every parliamentary and local election here, as a rule there is a new set of recommendations by ODHIR. From the conversations you've had with your staff, should we expect a new list of recommendation after 25 April as well?

Ambassador Del Monaco: This is a guess. It is absolutely premature and there is nothing that enables me to speculate on a guess. We have to proceed rapidly, and we will see in the aftermath of the elections whether there would be any ODIHR recommendation.

Q: One of the old consistent recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR has been the depoliticization of electoral commissions. Because of the deep mistrust between the parties, the elections are controlled by political parties. When do you think that Albania will be ready to give up political control over electoral structures?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Yes, very right. ODIHR advocated for the depoliticization of the electoral processes. And if I understand correctly following the June agreement a progressive depoliticization of the process will happen from the 2024 elections.

Q: Another problem that has accompanied the elections and had a great impact on the parliamentary environment was the implementation of the decriminalization law. In conversations with political actors in Albania, have you received promises that the lists of candidates for MP this time will be clean?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Again this is a very important subject and we started addressing it in the last December. I was new in my position when we organized together with the Dutch Ambassador an event on the implementation of the decriminalization law. This is to tell you the importance we have been constantly attaching to this issue. I think that there are at least two legal steps which can be compounded by an overall approach. The first legal step is the legal responsibility of the individual, of a single person when filling the self-declaration – and that is his legal personal responsibility. Then there is a second legal step because this list will have to be cleared by the CEC and by the Prosecutor General. What I see, what I acknowledge, is that the political parties are not assigned to the periphery of this important debate, the exchange of views of the political leaders on this sensitive matter. This is very important because we have been consistent: legal steps – political messages, because at the end of the day this is a sequence that starts with the individual personal responsibility of the potential candidate and ends with an immaculate list.

Q: Nevertheless, in this important meeting the representative of the Prosecutor's Office said that the law, however harsh, has not prevented or decreased the desire of people with a problematic past to candidate. You have had a meeting recently with the Director General of the State Police and the police have an important role to play in preventing the impact of organized crime in elections and votes buying. Did you have any guarantees or better to say feelings that the police will be ready to tackle in time any phenomenon that damages the electoral process?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Actually, I had two meetings with the General Director of the Police and both times I went back to the Presence with a very positive feeling. You know the police is not there to guarantee me of anything, it is not to me that the police has to guarantee anything. But I was very happy and I can share it with you and the Albanians that are watching us from home that the police stands ready to do its best to contribute to the organization of this celebration of democracy of 25 April. From our side as OSCE Presence, we have already started the training of the police, and we will soon distribute an updated version of a booklet with the fundamental guidelines for the management of public order in times of election.

Q: As we speak about free and fair and uncontestable elections in Albania, there has been a seismic event in what is called the democratic space of the world we live in. What impact has on Albania and not only the shocking event of 6 January in the US related to the presidential elections and their contestation?

Ambassador Del Monaco: I am afraid your question presupposes a deep understanding of Albania's dynamics, and I am afraid that I am too new in the country to provide you with a not superficial answer. But what I can say more in general terms is that it is very clear to me that democracy is not easy and it must not be taken for granted by anyone. If I can paraphrase what Jacques Delors once said referring to the EU integration process, democracy is like when you ride a bike: if you stop biking, you may fall. It is an open construction site.

Q: Election disputes in the US were addressed by the courts, even the threat was I will bring this case to the court. Possible disputes here are a little more delicate because the judicial system is still undergoing reform. In any dispute an arbiter is needed? Such a role here has been often played by the internationals and the ambassadors. Do you see a role for you and your colleagues a role in these elections in case of disputes?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Reforms are yet another positive development in this country. I am not looking at reforms in term of a loophole in the system. So I salute them and I encourage even more democratic reform. So, I prefer to convey a message of trust, trust in the Albanian institutions, trust in the Albanian judiciary, trust in your democracy. I speak for the Presence, the Presence will never be an arbiter, we are not an arbiter. I do not think that Albania needs an arbiter. It needs to implement the laws that are in place, and trust your judges because these will be resolved by the judges, the vetted judges, within the Electoral College.

Q: A very bad tradition that has been set by leaders, candidates and political parties is that they report themselves on their electoral campaign by avoiding and ignoring journalists. How do you see the role of the media countering this negative phenomenon?

Ambassador Del Monaco: My colleagues informed me about this practice and I know that the phenomenon has been criticized by ODIHR, for instance, as it may mislead voters and to some extent interfere in the freedom of media. I personally rely on the media for the information provided by the media for accurate, professional and impartial public information. To tell you how much I praise your work, which is extremely sensitive, especially during electoral phases, I will remind you that my first event that I attended here was on media, and even the fact that today I have accepted your invitation to exchange views not even three months after I have taken office, so, to some extent challenging the force of gravity, testifies for my respect for your work, for the expectations of the public, and the need to be transparent and exchange views.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, you said that media freedom is one of the priorities of your work, that the OSCE supports freedom of the media and recently we have a Freedom of the Media Representative in the OSCE area. My question is what do you see as a threat to media freedom in Albania?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Again, media freedom has been showing good progress. There are still issues that as I understand need to be solved. I have read about the fact that journalists from time to time are working under pressure, sometimes without a proper contract. And I understand as a human being that when you work in a sort of precarious situation you might

not be courageous enough to write, to communicate your thoughts, and convey completely impartial and unbiased information. I also read from the opinion of the Venice Commission about the political affiliation of some media outlets. On the other hand, I praise a recent development showing signs of a healthy media culture, I refer to the case of *Faktoje*, an independent media outlet that won a court case against a public institutions recently. This is an important result that again reinforces my optimism and my encouragement to trust the Albanian institutions. Of course, I am aware of the proposed changes to the new media law and the position of the OSCE (through the independent institution of the Representative of the Freedom of Media) and the position of the Venice Commission are well-known, but, also there, there are still some issues that need to be solved, whereas others were incorporated in the sequence of draft provisions that were exchanged both with the Representative for the Freedom of Media and the Venice Commission.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned as an achievement that a fact-checking media group succeeded that through a court decision was given the right that is already given by the law on right to information about official documents. Anyway, I would like to ask how happy are you with the reaction of the authorities regarding the cases of violence towards journalists or obstruction of their work, such as the case with recent protests in December in Tirana?

Ambassador Del Monaco: It is not me that have to be happy.

Q: Angry.

Ambassador Del Monaco: No, neither happy, nor angry. The Presence is not seeking any satisfaction from the Albanian authorities, and I am not in a position to pass any judgement on these allegations. My point is clear and is twofold: those journalists that believe to have suffered from violation of their rights should lodge a complaint before the Albanian judiciary, reinforce this way democracy. And on the other hand, we stated with the Albanian police the well-known principles of restraint, of using crowd-control tactics that are commensurate with the nature of the event, never putting an obstacle to the professional work of journalists.

Q: You mentioned that you have been in Albania for almost three months now. There is a lot of talk today about the danger that comes from conspiracy theories and fake news. How do you consider this to be a risk for the media, political class and eventually for the society?

Ambassador Del Monaco: Denialism, conspiracy theories, fake news pose a very serious challenge if not a threat everywhere in the world. This is not something specific for the Albanian environment. And they are all potential threats to security actually. The starting block of my discourse is that, for instance, internet is an ocean of information. The point is that we need the compass to navigate this ocean of information. The compass is not necessarily provided by restrictions of communication, sometimes it's too big, but by a collective effort that starts from families, from schools, from media itself, educating the population to draw the line between what is real and what is fake. This is what we call the resilience of a nation, which is a fundamental component of the national security. And since this is a security-related issue, the Presence deals with that. And this is why we have programmes together with the Department of Journalism of the University of Tirana that focus precisely on the fake news, and the other is with the public broadcaster.

Q: Mr. Ambassador, you mentioned Constitution Court as being yet another focus of your work. There has been a visible enthusiasm for the return to functioning of the Constitutional Court after two years, especially by the internationals, but we are conscious that the so-called justice reform is still far from complete. In the absence of a functional court, and I repeat this question, how do you think eventual electoral disputes will be solved?

Ambassador Del Monaco: You are right and you have picked the right noun: enthusiasm. Right next to this noun enthusiasm, I would add an adjective: rational. Because it is a rational enthusiasm, in fact, we witnessed with great pleasure that the Constitutional Court is now up and running. This is a keystone institution for the functioning of every democratic system, not only in Albania. Actually, I visited the Court the same day of the election of the new judges, and I had a very fruitful meeting with the Chairperson of the Constitutional Court. Now, only the judges of the Electoral College will solve eventually the disputes arising after the elections. The Constitutional Court will not have a role in this, unless two hypothesis happen, which is violation of human rights - an Albanian citizen may lodge a complaint that his rights were violated during the election process - and the other would be for lack of the due process of law. Otherwise, the electoral disputes should be settled by the judges, the vetted judges of the Electoral College.

Ends