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Interview with Ambassador Osmo Lipponen, Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, on electoral issues

By Eva Simoni

Q: What will be the OSCE contribution during preparations for the next elections?

A: That is still under preparation, but I can guarantee that there will be a lot of action where the OSCE/ODIHR and the OSCE Presence in Albania will be actively involved. To a certain extent we can make one-sided actions, but since most of what we can contribute has to take place in good co-operation with the Albanian partners, it is a little bit too early to say exactly what we are going to do. What we are doing now is discussing what should be done together. But, as we have said before, we will give our maximum support in order that the parliamentary elections and the preparations for the elections are conducted in a proper manner, since these elections are really crucial for the country.

Q: What are some of the recommendations that the OSCE/ODIHR has made to the political parties in the country in terms of amending the Electoral Code?

A: The main recommendations are, of course, those that concern the Central Election Commission (CEC) and re-composition of the electoral commissions. Then, the updating of the voter lists, and recommendations that there should be a simplified way to allocate parliamentary mandates. These are in a way the main politically difficult items. There is also a number of small technical comments on different articles of the Electoral Code, which are so technical that there will not be any politically meaningful discussion. But what is good, both major parties have in principle welcomed the recommendations, and also the comments coming from the rest of the society and political field have been very supportive. The report has been out in the translated form only for a few days, so we will be expecting more comments. Then it will be more proper time to draw conclusions.

Q: Do you think you will have support of the two main parties with regard to the re-composition of the Central Election Commission (CEC)?

A: I am sure that there will be a way out of this. If I judge the first comments on the report, since both are positively inclined towards it, it means that there is a possibility to reach an agreement, and I have to be professionally optimistic.

Q: What do you mean by balance in the CEC?

A: The ODIHR and the Venice Commission report is presenting different ideas how to rebalance the CEC, especially in order to make the decision-making such that there would be no blocking. They also refer that there should be a more professional approach in the CEC. And all this means that they are also of the opinion that the Constitution is no

hindrance, so that if there has to be found a way out to make the CEC a properly functioning institution, it can be changed. And this is different from the Albanian prevailing opinion. We were now talking about the CEC. At least there is time for changing or recomposing the CEC. And in principle I am of the opinion that if there is political will, there will even be time also to discuss the electoral system. But all these kind of discussions should be completed the latest by mid summer. Also, if you change the electoral system, then it takes even more time and resources for its implementation.

Q: Is there enough time to make changes to the Electoral Code? There are some opinions that there is not enough time.

A: Definitely there is enough time because there has already been so much of the professional work done: there is an extensive report by the ODIHR on last elections. It has a number of recommendations and remarks, and now this even more detailed report by the ODIHR and the Venice Commission will really give support to the legislative work. I believe where there is a time gap is in the implementation. Like last year the new Electoral Code came into force and despite all the efforts by the CEC and our support, the knowledge about the Code and its demands was yet not deep enough in the field. The faster the Code now would be amended, the more it will guarantee time for proper implementation training, and especially to improve the voter lists, which will be the major effort for the Government and the whole society, and needs a lot of support also from the international community.

Q: Do you think that the proposals of the Wise Men Group will be taken into account when amending the Electoral Code?

A: It is up to the parliamentary system to decide. The comments are of course a contribution to the discussion, but it is the parliamentary system that has to make an evaluation of these contributions.

Q: Will the OSCE organize any roundtables with the political parties to speed up amendments to the Code, after you receive the signal that the two major parties have accepted the recommendations?

A: We are expecting the comments when everybody has had time to study this last report, and then it is time to draw the conclusions – what will be the ways to tackle this issue, what will be the negotiation process. I am sure there will also be roundtables. What are then the issues discussed at the roundtables is another matter.

Q: The Democratic Party is considering the idea not to enter elections with Nano being Prime Minister. Do you think this is a fair and realistic opinion?

A: You said the Democratic Party is considering the idea, the Democratic Party has not made such a decision. It is always up to a party in any democracy to make its own choices. What is then constructive and good for the country that of course is another matter. Personally I do not believe that anybody would make that kind of decision in this

kind of important political situation, because the elections are the only way to gain power and to see support. Of course, the elections have to be free and fair.

Q: What is the impact of the success or failure of the next elections for the future of Albania?

A: We have said it at several occasions that the next elections will be crucial. The confidence in the electoral system and in the political system has to be re-established. When there have been such series of elections which somebody has always contested, and when also the international comments have been pretty strong and critical, it would be time for the functioning of the Albanian democracy to reach results. Then there is also another aspect, which has been pointed out in some of the international comments lately: free and fair elections are in a way the ticket to integration, be it in security structures or in the European integration.