HEAD OF PRESENCE AMBASSADOR VINCENZO DEL MONACO'S REMARKS AT "OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING, THE TIME IS NOW!" CONFERENCE

24 May 2022

- Dear State Election Commissioner, Mr. Ilirjan Celibashi, Madame Speaker of the Albanian Assembly, Madame Ambassador, dear colleagues Excellences, representatives of political parties, dear participants present in the room and diaspora members following us online. It is a real pleasure to be here today with you all, partners and colleagues.

- When this idea of organizing today's joint conference came up already some time ago, I instantly replied "**YES**" to Commissioner Celibashi, without any hesitation. And the reason for my and my team's immediate support is quite obvious. The time is **now** to start working on the implementation of the out-of-country voting right, a Constitutional right for Albanians. All Albanians deserve to have their interests represented, to contribute to the political life of their homeland, to hold politically accountable the elected representatives, regardless of where they live, in Albania and abroad.

- To add to the sense of urgency - and also to the political relevance of this conference - let us all remind that according to the official statistics, more than 1/3 of Albania's population lives abroad, of whom more than 1.3 million are considered eligible to vote.[1] This is a considerable part of the population, which has been contributing to the country's economic and cultural development and welfare and will continue to do so, and is extremely beneficial to Albania in the world.

- Out-of-Country voting is also a priority in terms of Governance, of good governance. An opportunity for Albania. The findings of the "Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: From Analysis to Action, Good Governance in Economic and Environmental Issues", very recently developed by the Swedish assistance agency SIDA are clear enough. They speak about fostering closer linkages with diaspora to mobilize and leverage its professional networks. If you allow me to interpret those findings politically, I would say that if you want to tap into the diaspora to attract investments, to put remittances to productive use, and to ensure knowledge transfer from the diaspora to Albania, then it is primordial to strengthen their political and civic bonds with their homeland, allowing them to vote from abroad.

- Actually, I want to commend the political actors for finding common grounds in 2020 to introduce provisions in the Electoral Code enabling voting from abroad. They had an impeccable vision and they wrote the right legal provisions that need now to be fully implemented.

- As you might know, there is no OSCE/ODIHR recommendation or international standard regulating OCV. The decision to implement it rests with each individual state – in this case,

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[1] Data published by the Institute of Statistics in December 2020 show that around 1,684,135 (37%) of the population live abroad. diaspora-ne-shifra-2020.pdf (instat.gov.al)

with the Albanian authorities. The concerted efforts of all involved institutions (CEC, Assembly, Government, diaspora) and civil society are required to implement all the provisions in the Electoral Code. It is an exercise for Albania to be piloted and managed exclusively by Albanians.

- From the OSCE Presence hand, I reiterate here our readiness to make available our expertise to all actors involved, filling the potential gaps, so that in the future, once the OCV is up and running, there will be no ODIHR recommendation on it. Since 2018, the Presence has assisted the discussion related to OCV through supporting the Assembly of Albania and then-Ad Hoc Committee on Electoral Reform organizing dedicated workshops on the topic. Most recently, at the end of 2020, the Presence also supported the CEC through providing a comparative study on different models of OCV from five European countries[2] – we will hear more about them in the afternoon session by the Presence-hired expert who prepared the study.

- I am fully cognizant of the challenges laying ahead of you. On top of all, the design of the voting system from abroad must strike a balance between guaranteeing the right to vote to eligible voters living outside Albania and meeting standards of integrity, transparency, and security to ensure trust in the electoral process.

- To this purpose, the administrative and logistical aspects of the process should be carefully considered – starting with the registration of voters residing abroad, the voting and counting method, the cost of financial and human resources, etc., to reduce beforehand any grounded issue of trust in the process. Trust is yet a key word, which I have repeatedly heard about since I've taken office in Tirana. It is a word, it is a notion, it is an objective on which we as OSCE are fully dedicated.

- Albania is among very few countries in the OSCE area that still does not provide voting from abroad to its citizens.[3] Being in this circumstance and well ahead of 2025 parliamentary elections provides an excellent opportunity to learn from experience of other countries and implement the most suitable model to the country's and citizen's needs.

- Today's conference should not be considered as reaching the destination, but only as the beginning of a wider discussion on a serious and concrete process, which must be open to suggestions and enable meaningful consultations with all interested parties, diaspora first and foremost.

- Looking forward, important work is to be made. We at the OSCE Presence, together with our ODIHR colleagues, stand fully ready to help and to continue our support. Thank you once again, dear Commissioner to you and your team, to my team, for the organization of this event.

- I wish you all a concrete and fruitful discussion today.

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[2] A deliberate combination of EU/non-EU and Balkans/rest of Europe models: Austria, Croatia and Slovenia, NM and BiH.
[3] According to the International IDEA database, Albania alongside Montenegro, Malta, San Marino, and Holy See are the only countries in Europe and OSCE area that do not allow OCV. Europe | International IDEA; Out-of-Country Voting (idea.int)