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Interview with the Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Pavel Vacek

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Approximately three months before the new elections for the Albanian parliament take place, there are still some issues to be solved, such as the preparation of the voter lists or the training of the members of the electoral commissions. An agreement on the electoral zone boundaries was reached recently following several-month debates. All these preparations and the drafting of radical amendments to the Albanian Electoral Code in itself have been carried out with the close assistance and mediation of the OSCE Presence in Tirana. Majlinda Zeqiri of the BBC interviewed the OSCE Ambassador Pavel Vacek with regard to these developments, initially asking him whether he was satisfied with the pace of the election preparation process.

***Ambassador Vacek:** Satisfaction is a relative notion and certainly the overall balance has been mixed. There have been failures, there have been delays, there have been political complications, but on the other hand, there has clearly been a progress towards more orderly and fair elections than before.*

Mr. Vacek, you have said that the new electoral zone boundaries, which were agreed upon following numerous disagreements, show progress, but still did not fulfil all the legal requirements. What did you mean by that?

***Ambassador Vacek:** The legal requirements stem clearly from the Albanian Electoral Code, which was lastly amended on 10 January 2005. There are a number of criteria in the Electoral Code. There is one particular numerical criterion which sets the permissible deviation of the number of voters of the zones at plus-minus 10%. Then there are other small details, criteria defining how the zones should be concretely drawn. Speaking of the numerical parameter, it has been clearly exceeded in a number of cases within the solution agreed to by the principal stakeholders.*

Mr. Vacek, the voter lists are not ready yet. Do you think there is enough time for these lists to be prepared?

***Ambassador Vacek:** There is a clear calendar of preparations of the voter lists and that in itself is doable. The question is whether the outcome will be of good enough quality, so it is rather a matter of the technique of arriving again at the voter lists of a desirable quality than a matter of time.*

The OSCE and the representative office of the European Union have urged for swift actions in order to be ready for the elections. Is there enough time?

***Ambassador Vacek:** The delays have for sure been there, but none of the delays or complications so far have affected the preparations fatally. The preparation of the orderly elections is still within the possibilities of the respective authorities in charge, be it the Central Election Commission, the Ministry of Local Government, or the mayors themselves. That particularly relates to the voter lists.*

What can you say with regard to the training of the commissions' members. There has been often criticism. How much this could affect the elections?

Ambassador Vacek: The training of the members of the electoral commissions in itself is one of the critical issues, but what has still been a matter of attention of certain criticism is the provision that allows for replacing the members of the commissions at a very short notice and very shortly before the elections themselves and that in itself is a potential difficulty, because the question is whether this provision will not be misused. I personally can hope that this will not happen.

Mr. Vacek there has also been criticism towards the OSCE with regard to its mediation mission during elections in Albania. How would you answer to such criticism?

Ambassador Vacek: It is difficult to reply to such criticism or allegations in general terms. What I can say is something which is obvious: all of our facilitating or mediating of whatever political understanding is there only when we are requested and wanted. We do not impose such a role, because besides that we do have a number of concretely mandated tasks. But the mediation in political affairs is always an ungrateful job and for me always a matter of demand on the part of the Albanian political actors. This is one precondition for such an involvement, and then the other rule of the thumb is that it has to be a mediation with a certain purpose that is compatible with what we are supposed to do in the country. In the case of the elections and the electoral reform, this mediation has been involved in such cases when otherwise we would be faced with a stalemate and lack of any progress at all.