

**INTERVIEW OF ACTING HEAD OF PRESENCE, CLARISSE PASZTORY,
WITH VIZION PLUS TV
17 January 2024**

Interviewed by: Enkelejda Mema

A little more than less than a year from the 2025 parliamentary elections, with ODIHR and the Constitutional Court recommendations and decisions already in place, is there enough time for politics to fulfil its obligations and amend the Electoral Code as required?

I think for any political decision, the same applies: if there is a political will, there is a way. As you very correctly said, these recommendations are not particularly new – some of them come from the 2021 elections, some from the local elections later on. I think the parties are pretty much aware of what they are. It is also not that they have not been discussed in time. It is now time to sit down and come to conclusions. What is important to keep in mind is that, as a rule of thumb, the electoral framework should really be in place not less than a year before elections. This is a good international standard, and this time is needed by the Central Election Commission, but also by the other institutions in charge of electoral rules to implement any changes and to properly prepare. So, if we are supposed to have elections in spring next year, time is ticking, as we always say, and it is good to speed up.

The Electoral Reform Committee, despite being established for three years now, have taken no decisions. The work of this committee is expected to begin on Friday. What is your appeal to the ruling majority and the opposition?

We are talking to all of them, and I feel very enheartened to tell you the truth, that there is so much attention now, included by the media, and that I think is the very promising side. Our role is not to appeal, but to assist, really to help. If people want our help, be it for technical solutions, or be it for political facilitation, we are more than ready to do so, and if I say we, I mean both us, as the OSCE Presence in Albania, as well as ODIHR, and we hope that we will soon get more expertise also in person here. I think what is important to keep in mind is that the issues that Albania is facing are neither new, nor unique, nor is it right or wrong answers. It is not a mathematical formula, two plus two is four, or is it five? No. You need to find a system that fits perfectly for you and for your issues, and also you need to always remember that the electoral reform, like most reforms, is not a one-off. It is not that you make today a decision that stays in place for the next 100 years. Things evolve, things change. I think we now need to do the best to address the very well-intended OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, and the very important and really binding Constitutional Court decisions, to address them with the best of intent, with a view to resolving them. And again, as I am saying, this is not a one-off. After the next elections, there will be a new set of recommendations, and we will continue. This is ongoing work, but now is the time to resolve a number of outstanding issues that the political parties are very well aware of, and make the system better, and make the system a model for the entire region.

When you say you will help with political issues, what do you mean?

I think you are very well aware of what the key issues are. There are two or actually three issues coming out of the Constitutional Court, that is out-of-country voting, the formula for calculating the seats, and the threshold. And that comes from the Constitutional Court - these are not recommendations by the OSCE, but this is coming from the arbiter of your own rules, which is the Constitutional Court, and hence, I am sure that everybody will take them very seriously. When it comes to the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, I would say the key ones concern the prompt investigations and follow-up of allegations of misconduct, so serious election infringements: vote buying, voter pressure, etc. The second set that is important is the secrecy of the vote, that this must be guaranteed. So, while this has hugely improved over the last 20 years, and this is also reflected in the recommendations, group voting, family voting, vote buying are still an issue, and here it is not necessarily even new rules, it's a better application and implementation of the rules. And the third issue also concerns you as a media, and that is a better media work when it comes to elections. Be more inquisitive, be more curious. We are seeing a lot of instances where the media simply copy-pastes what it gets from political parties or institutions. I understand it makes the job easier, but does it make it more fun? I think you should be more inquisitive, and also that will make it more interesting for the population to read your news, and to engage, and to think about what actually is being debated about.

The electoral reform has always been the product of discussions, debates and proposals between the majority and the opposition. Do you think that the bi-partisan commission is the only model or formula that politics and government should follow?

It is not the only model or only role. I think it is a well-tested model in this country, but it takes two to tango, as you always say. What is politics, regardless of what the issue is, in this case elections? Politics is the representation and the balance of interests and the art of finding a compromise. Now, in elections, it is fairly normal that political parties have different interests, it is about winning an election. And this is perfectly understandable and not abnormal, and would be the same in any country on earth. It is now time to find a system that meets the requirements of this country at this current time, in next year, in 2025. We have this bi-partisan committee that has been set up by parliament. It has already sort of repeated extensions and deadlines, and this time it would be difficult to further extend deadlines, because, as I said, time is ticking. We do not have another year or something, we have another few weeks or months at best. And I think everybody should use the opportunity to engage in this process that finally is starting. I know that there are issues about chairing and who and what. To tell you the truth, I think this is a little bit besides a debate. An inclusive process means that as many stakeholders as possible are included, are part, are contributing, are heard to, are listened too. It includes, but is not limited to political parties, that also includes civil society, activists, or whomever. Everybody should be included, everybody should give their proposals, then they are debated, and then – the way it is in politics and in democracy – decisions will be made, and not always everybody will agree on everything. But overall, the package should be inclusively listened to and as consensual as possible.

The OSCE/ODIHR have made various recommendations over the years, many of which have not been reflected in the Electoral Code. How essential are these recommendations not to remain in paper but to prepare the legal framework?

They are very essential, of course, because otherwise we wouldn't make them. The OSCE/ODIHR recommendations that are made for every country where the OSCE/ODIHR observes elections, which is in all OSCE countries, are made with the best of intent. They are called recommendations for a reason – they are recommendations, not impositions. The OSCE is not really coming with “this is what you need to do”. We are giving you, with the best of intent, advice and guidance what you can do to make your system better. And a lot of recommendations have been implemented all the time. The past elections are not the first elections that we have observed, and if you compare the recommendations made in the last two elections from '21 an '23 to the ones from 20 years ago, you will see a huge qualitative jump. Why is that? That is: a) many recommendations have been implemented and things have already hugely improved, but also because electoral recommendations evolve all the time. Think, for example: in the current recommendations you will find issues on the use of technology. You will not find them ten years ago, simply because this technology did not even exist. So, the recommendations are not static, they are evolving, and they are based on what you have. And yes, if ODIHR gives you recommendations which four years later have not been implemented then you will probably be reminded of them the next time around, again, not as a punishment – as a reminder and as an *aide-mémoire*.

Yesterday you met the two co-chairs of electoral reform, Mr. Gjicknuri and Mr. Alibeaj. You wrote on Twitter “continuing inclusive meetings on this important reform”. When you say inclusive, what do you mean? That part of this is also the largest opposition group that is led by Mr. Gazmend Bardhi?

I think I have already partly answered your question before that. Inclusive, first of all, means inclusive and extensive, it means that everyone – all the political parties, but not only political parties – are participating, have the ability to express their ideas, to make suggestions and to be listened to. So that is what inclusive means. Secondly, yes of course, there is no doubt in my mind that the group of Mr. Bardhi should be equally be included in this. I think what you are alluding to is the question of chairing, and that is what I tried to say before. For me this is a side point: a chair chairs, a chair organizes the work of the committee, the chair does not decide single-handedly on the outcomes. It is the participants, everybody who actively participates, who contributes, who makes suggestions, who decides, and in the end it is not the ad hoc committee and nor even the standard committee but the parliament as such which then votes for amendments. So, this is a parliamentary process, where everybody who is in parliament will have a role. Right now we are in the stage, finally, I might say, that we are properly starting the substantive work in the ad hoc committee, and I would certainly hope that all of the participants make use of this instrument, of this committee, go there, bring themselves in, participate, make active suggestions. And I am going to meet, by the way, a large part, including the group that you mentioned this afternoon on exactly that subject and I will tell them the exact same thing. I would be extremely disappointed if they did not bring themselves in and if they would miss out on the chance to make their suggestions which I am sure are considered and well thought through and have a very good basis.

If the government and the opposition have problems to make a good electoral reform, the role of the OSCE will be only technical or also political?

Our role is both. First of all, we are different OSCE entities that are involved. This is the OSCE Presence, currently represented by myself, there is also ODIHR and the expertise there. We are

perfectly willing, if asked, to assist with technical solutions, so if people say how do other countries solve this, what can you recommend, what is a good practice – we can do this. We are also perfectly willing and also offering to facilitate political compromise, if asked. We will never impose ourselves, but if we are asked to bring people together and to try to forge compromise, we are very willing to do that. But one thing is important to remember: we are not stakeholders and we are not decision makers, and neither can I, nor – this is really important to say – nor do I want to replace domestic political will. These are your elections, this is your electoral reform, this is your process, this is supposed to benefit your citizens and your political entity called Albania, and we are here to assist and to do as much, or as little, as we are asked to do. Use us, call us, we are awaiting that, but do not think we are going to solve it all for you.

Thank you!

Thank you very much!

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