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The OSCE Presence in Albania: The Role of Field Stations and Their Activities¹

Introduction

The OSCE Presence in Albania was established after the widespread civil unrest of 1997 that led to the collapse of the Albanian state. Over time, it expanded its operations from a single headquarters to encompass eleven field stations throughout the country, which were responsible for monitoring the political and security situation in the country as well as the border situation during the Kosovo crisis in 1998-9. Since 1997, the overall security situation in Albania has significantly improved and much progress has been achieved by Albania in terms of institutional reforms and democratic development. As a result, the European Union decided on 31 January 2003 to open negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement, the first step towards eventual accession.

Given Albania's orientation towards Europe, the political leadership of the country and its institutions need a consolidation of democracy and overall stability. In line with Albania's aspirations, the Presence's role has evolved, which has meant a scaling down of personnel and a closure of many of its field stations. There are now a total of 30 international and 70 national staff members and four remaining field stations: Shkodra and Kukës in the north, and Vlora and Gjirokastra in the south. A liaison office covering the central regions of Tirana and Durrës is located at Presence headquarters.

The Presence has also reoriented its mandate to take into account the progress made since the original mandate was approved in 1997. Under the current one, which was issued in December 2003, the Presence provides assistance and expertise in legislative and judicial reform, including property reform, regional administrative reform, electoral reform, parliamentary capacity building, anti-trafficking and anti-corruption, media development, the promotion of good governance and strengthening of civil society, and police assistance focused on border police and co-ordinated with other international actors in the field.² In this way, the Presence has adapted to the progress made by Albania, which has gone from being a country in crisis to a post-conflict country facing major challenges of transition. This article intends to describe the work and role of the field stations under the new mandate, their

¹ The opinions expressed in this article are exclusively the personal views of the author.

² Cf. OSCE, Permanent Council, Decision No. 588, Mandate of the OSCE Presence in Albania, PC.DEC/588, 18 December 2003, in: OSCE, Permanent Council, 488th Plenary Meeting, PC Journal No. 488, Agenda item 16, 18 December 2003.

perception of Albanian reality, and their notable contribution to the positive evolution of Albania.

The Current Situation in Albania: A Field Perspective

Field Station staff members are confronted by the reality faced by ordinary Albanian citizens on a daily basis, which is characterized by a number of problems that cannot be overlooked by the international community. First of all, the Albanian political landscape is chiefly shaped by two overwhelmingly dominant and driving forces: the Socialist Party, currently the governing majority, and the Democratic Party, the major party of opposition. Since the fall of Communism, the Albanian political landscape has been characterized by this sharp bipolarization. This has led to a deeply entrenched antagonistic approach to political issues, which in turn has seriously hindered the pace of Albania's overall progress. Moreover, it has undermined public confidence in the country's political leaders and in its future. Therefore, the political atmosphere is marred by almost constant division and sterile, unrestricted hostility. Potential for consensus between the protagonists exists but is limited to a quite narrow common denominator, which is often defined by external aspirations rather than by a strategic convergence towards the vital interests of the country. At the local level this has a direct detrimental effect on the efficiency of municipal administrations and municipal councils, which are often deadlocked due to bitter political infighting sometimes driven by personal interests.

The deficiencies of infrastructure, in spite of some significant improvements, notably road construction, have not helped the economy to recover from its absolute low point in 1997. But there has been growth of six to eight per cent per annum since then. Even though sufficient electricity is produced in the north-western part of the country to meet most of Albania's needs, power shortages are endemic and will remain so for many years to come. Outdated infrastructure, weak management of the national electricity company, political manipulation of the electricity issue by opposition parties, and a disintegrated civic sense have made this issue particularly sensitive in the northern city of Shkodra. Such a situation harshly impacts on the quality of life and morale of citizens on a daily basis.

At 15 to 18 per cent, unemployment is high in the whole country, but especially in the north, where extreme poverty plagues certain areas. Around 30 per cent of the Albanian population lives below the poverty line³ despite the fact that economic growth is steady and high, though not evenly distributed.

3 According to Ambassador Osmo Lipponen, Head of Presence, Report to the US Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Hearing: Advancing Democracy in Albania, 20 July 2004, at: <http://www.csce.gov>.

The country has had to cope with large-scale population shifts, both within and across its borders. The rural population, after decades of suffering from restricted freedom of movement, has been migrating from the north to the main cities, in particular to the capital Tirana, and has also been emigrating abroad. One fourth of the population has left Albania to seek improved living conditions abroad. While this phenomenon has operated as “a safety valve”⁴ for the population, and is an important source of remittances, emigration has caused a brain drain of remarkable dimensions. Emigration – legal or illegal – should be a cause for serious concern among Albania’s political leadership, because it is seen by many ordinary Albanians as the only hope for escape from the hardships of life in their own country. This in itself is an unpleasant symptom of the plight experienced by the population for a number of years. It demonstrates, too, the lack of expectations ordinary Albanians have for a significant improvement in their lives under the current circumstances.

The capacities of the legal and judicial institutions are weak, with inadequate implementation of laws and sometimes inefficient enforcement of public order. At the local level, this leads to violent security incidents as well as unresolved disputes between citizens, mainly related to property. Corruption is rampant in locally and centrally run institutions and this phenomenon, which directly impacts the economy by hindering foreign investment. Clientelism is so widespread that it has become systematic and rooted in the culture. This undue use of political influence and connections by the main political parties frequently causes party loyalty to prevail over professionalism. Political appointees can be found in almost all administrative sectors, to the detriment of the services that should be provided to the population.

The general lack of accountability and transparency has undermined the credibility of central and local institutions and of many political parties. Public pressure on elected representatives – at whatever levels and irrespective of allegiance – has been almost non-existent, despite the fact that this is one of the most important issues Albania has to face in the future. Albanian civil society is feeble and is struggling to have its voice heard. The combination of the above mentioned factors breeds criminality, hampers economic development, favours human trafficking, weakens democracy, and severely damages the trust of the local population, who are largely aware of these many striking shortcomings in the state. It is in this specific context that the Presence and, in particular, the field stations operate.

4 Ibid.

The Contribution of the Field Stations to the Work of the Presence – Their Role and Modus Operandi

The Presence's current network of four field stations and a liaison office is unique in Albania and constitutes one of its major strengths. Virtually no other international organization operating in the country is as directly in touch with the population – or as trusted by local contacts – to give advice and expertise on a wide range of matters.

The field stations extend the reach of headquarters in the country. They are a key source of information and provide valuable feedback for the programmatic work directed by the Presence's headquarters. This guarantees a constant reading of the pulse of the country in its key geographic sectors and population centres. This is particularly relevant for the Presence's project work. The various roles played by the field stations are embodied by staff members, who are deeply involved in local co-operation with Albanian institutions representing national and local authorities and other partners. Contacts are frequent, almost daily, between the field station staff and a variety of actors of local life, such as the police, members of the judiciary, prefects, mayors, chairmen of regional councils, religious leaders, heads of political parties, and civil society representatives.

Building trust is the essential component of such a relationship. It requires social skills, tact, commitment, and the ability to take responsibility and adapt. Relations at the local level are usually close and amicable, contributing to the good reputation of the OSCE in general in Albania. This helps to solve problems. Being a member of a field station team requires a considerable level of integration into the population and cross-cultural awareness in order to avoid intercultural dissonance. Field station co-operation extends not only to the Albanians, but also to many other international actors present in the country. The field stations have frequent contacts with international organizations such as the European Commission, USAID, EUMM, IOM, UNHCR, UNOPS, UNDP, Peace Corps, Interforza, and various embassies or consulates, all of which require local information and frequent co-operation for their activities.

Intensive co-operation with local actors bears fruit in different ways. First, it allows the field station staff to have access to precise information on the subjects the Presence covers in its mandate in the areas of democratization, rule of law, human rights, and security co-operation. Frequent meetings and the trust built between staff members and key local players makes it possible for the Presence to measure the amount of progress Albania has made in recent years in a number of fields and assess what weaknesses remain to be dealt with.

Since Albanian political life is riven by strife, it is especially important to follow up on issues outside the Assembly and the political party headquarters in the capital. In that respect, field stations provide the Political Af-

fairs Unit with reports, information, and analyses made at local level on the political situation as a basis for further consideration. In doing so, the field stations' information is helpful in shaping the Presence's decision-making process. Field stations collect information on specific issues required by Presence headquarters and provide it with assessment and analysis for the departments by identifying problems at the local level that could impact nationally. The field stations also perform this task for each of the Presence's three departments: security, rule of law, and democratization.

Second, because of the relations and close contacts the Presence enjoys with different Albanian interlocutors, field station staff are often asked to act as mediators or honest brokers to solve local problems or tensions. In many cases, the field station staff are seen by their Albanian interlocutors as impartial and reliable partners. They have mediated between the municipal administration and citizens and between political parties, especially during elections, when tensions between candidates occasionally occur.

Third, since the Presence, in line with the request of the Albanian authorities and the new mandate, has embarked on more project-oriented work, the field stations have come up with a number of project activities to be part of headquarters programmes. A strong stimulus has been given to this direction by the current Head of Presence, Ambassador Pavel Vacek. Many of the project activities are initiated in co-operation with civil society representatives, the police, local government units, the judiciary, and the media in response to a problem that has been identified locally. Project activities are then often implemented in a pilot phase in the area of responsibility of one field station and their outcome evaluated. This experience can sometimes lead to nationwide implementation, thus enhancing the impact of the project.

Field Station Activities as Part of Headquarters Departmental Outreach

The field stations work in direct co-operation with the three departments in headquarters and are responsible for implementing part of their programmes as well as evaluating their results at a local level. The field stations conduct a variety of activities in the field of democratization, rule of law, and security co-operation. Some examples of field station involvement in these activities are cited below.

Democratization – Elections

The Presence has played a major role in supporting the relevant Albanian institutions with expertise in all elections since the OSCE came into the country. Following the release of the OSCE/ODIHR Final Report on October 2003 local government elections, which called for revisions to the newly approved Electoral Code, the Presence's Electoral Reform Unit has supported

the implementation of ODIHR recommendations on problem areas identified by the relevant Albanian authorities.

Albania held parliamentary elections in July 2005. The preparation and the conduct of the 2005 parliamentary elections, in particular, were a decisive test of Albania's democratic credentials. This was all the more important following ODIHR's description of the October 2003 local government elections as a "missed opportunity" in terms of compliance with international standards. In 2005, ODIHR judged that "the [...] parliamentary election complied, only in part, with OSCE commitments and other international standards for democratic elections, and marked some progress in the conduct of elections in Albania".⁵

One of the Presence's main tasks is to provide expertise and support to the Albanian government for elections in general, something it also did with respect to the 2005 parliamentary elections. The Presence provided such support via a technical assistance project, whose aim was to help the Ministry of Local Government and Decentralization and the Central Elections Commission (CEC) to improve the voter register, which had been highlighted as a major problem in 2003. Indeed ODIHR stated in its Final Report that the new framework on voter registration implemented by state and local government units resulted in improved accuracy of voter lists in many electoral zones.⁶

Thanks to their strategic locations, the field stations were instrumental in providing the Presence's Democratization Department with rapid and up-to-date information from around the country on the pace and progress of the citizen registration process and the compilation of the voter register. This enabled the Democratization Department to inform the Ministry of Local Government of problems occurring in local government units and to take action to speed up the process. The field stations were often the first contact point for local government units themselves when they faced difficulties in this task.

During elections, every field station is usually involved in preparing the ground for the deployment of ODIHR long-term (LTOs) and short-term observers (STOs). The field stations prepare all the contacts and briefing packs and provide logistical support for the observers, including human resources. In addition, the field stations also act as observers and provide Presence headquarters with assessments of political developments and the electoral process prior to and during elections.

5 OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections, 3 July 2005, OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*, Warsaw, 7 November 2005, p. 4.

6 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 5.

Democratization – Civil Society Capacity Building

The field stations actively encourage civil society activities in their areas of responsibility by providing expert advice, conducting training, and providing logistic support. One such example is the civil society group “Mjaft!” (“Enough!”), a nationwide citizen’s initiative that was originally launched to raise public awareness of Albania’s many dire social problems, namely health and education, blood feuds, trafficking and organized crime, poverty and unemployment, discrimination against women and the handicapped, the corruption of Albanian politics, environmental degradation, and the lack of progress in EU integration. Mjaft! has earned credentials as a watchdog of the Albanian political scene.

At first, the field stations provided Mjaft! with technical assistance and logistic support, thanks to the extra budgetary resources coming from willing external donors. At the local level, youth activists were trained and youth debates and concerts were organized. Their specific aim was to raise issues particularly affecting certain areas.

Field stations also provide logistical support and advice to the National Network of Civil Society Development Centres (NNCSDC), a joint project of the Presence and the Netherlands Organization for Development (SNV), which is supported by several bilateral donors and delivers a grassroots development programme to local civil society and community-based groups. This network consists of six centres in Durrës, Elbasan, Korça, Vlora, Kukës, and Shkodra. It supplies a number of services to civil society and local government, including technical assistance, training, consultation, and the creation of new co-ordinating structures and the organization of specialized meetings. The CSDCs strive to create networks and enhance citizen participation in the decision-making process.

Rule of Law – Fair Trial Development

The strong need to increase public confidence in the judiciary and related institutions was the reason for the Presence initiating the Fair Trial Development Project (FTDP). Within the scope of the project, the field stations follow cases not only in Tirana, but also in Durrës, Vlora, Gjirokastra, Shkodra, and Kukës. Standardized templates to be filled out by the observers after the completion of each trial, written court verdicts, and additional interviews carried out with judges, prosecutors, and defence lawyers form the basis of the analysis carried out by the FTDP. The findings are summarized in court observation reports drafted every six weeks.

The contributions of field stations have been crucial, given the need to obtain a geographical spread of results, and have resulted in the compilation and publication of an Interim Report for the period from October 2003 to July 2004, which made recommendations concerning court organization, the

legislative framework, juvenile justice, and the professionalism of the judiciary. This report was distributed to all district and appeal courts, as well as the main judicial bodies at the national level.

Rule of Law – Pre-Trial Detention

Within the framework of the Human Rights Unit's work on pre-trial detention, the field stations conduct annual surveys of the treatment of prisoners held on remand and their detention cells. These surveys form the basis for the recommendations given by the Presence's Rule of Law Department to the Ministry of Public Order and the Ministry of Justice on how to improve the respect of these prisoners' rights and to speed up the transfer of the responsibilities over pre-trial detention facilities from the Ministry of Public Order to the Ministry of Justice. Throughout the year, field stations are often called upon by the police to look into cases in pre-trial detention cells. In March 2004, the Presence published a report on the pre-trial detention system in Albania. This report was publicized by many national and international media organs. The reports helped speed up the transfer of responsibility for pre-trial detention cells from the Ministry of Public Order to the Ministry of Justice, in compliance with international standards.

Security Co-operation – Police Assistance and Border Management.

The field stations regularly provide updated information on the security situation in the country to the Presence headquarters in co-operation with the Albanian police. Field stations facilitate cross-border meetings with neighbouring border authorities, in particular on the border with Kosovo.

Field stations have conducted border surveys and initiated project ideas such as the Solar Panel Project, which aims at providing a more stable, low-maintenance energy source at key border crossing points and in police commissariats. This pilot project, which began in Shkodra, is to be implemented nationwide. Funding for the Solar Panel Project has been provided through extra budgetary contributions from the Czech Republic and France.

The communication systems-related second language training provided by the Security Department to assist the government of Albania in implementing its Strategic Plan for Border Management will also be dependent on continued field support. Field stations will help identify suitable locations for training, assist in the recruitment of language instructors, and provide additional support to the project. The project should help to enhance police radio communication systems, provide a faster response time in emergencies and operations against cross-border organized crime, and result in the fulfilment of the NATO language requirement. The language course being implemented in co-operation with the British Council is another project that will serve a similar purpose for the border police and will help to raise its standards. Eng-

lish language courses will be given to border police officers at field station-level and at the Police Academy in Tirana.

Security Co-operation – Pre-Screening

The Presence contributes as an implementing partner to the EU CARDS 2003 Project on Pre-screening of Asylum-Seekers and Migrants by means of its field presence, its programmatic approach and related experience, and its continued good co-operation with the Albanian state police, including the border police with its central structures and their representatives in the field. The Presence in Albania therefore has the lead role in terms of liaison and monitoring in the field. The project on the Pre-screening of Asylum-Seekers and Migrants is managed by the Anti-Trafficking Unit. Six national pre-screening officers work under the supervision of the field stations, which reinforce and support the pre-screening officers in implementing the project goals. Pre-screening officers are currently deployed to field stations in Kukës, Shkodra, and Gjirokastra and there is one at Presence headquarters in Tirana. The field stations facilitate the contacts of the pre-screening officers to local police to support them in their work.

Field Station Shkodra: A Concise Case Study

Each field station has its own specialty. Field Station Shkodra has had a strong emphasis on security-related issues. It has witnessed a dramatic improvement in the local public security situation over the last three years. The security situation moved from being very problematic to good, thanks to the dedicated work of several police directors, whose many actions and initiatives were instrumental in strengthening the rule of law. A few examples are worth mentioning. In 2004, a well-led police department successfully managed to collect hundreds of weapons in only a few weeks in a self-run door-to-door collection programme. After an awareness campaign launched on local media and funded by the German Delegation to the OSCE, the police also managed to combat the harvest of *cannabis sativa* in the surrounding hills.

Being located on the northern border, Field Station Shkodra witnessed the decrease of trafficking in human beings due to a nationwide action plan enforced by the police. While significant success has been achieved, Albania does still remain a country of transit and of origin. The extreme poverty of the northern part of the country is a fertile breeding ground for a number of illegal activities. It is not insignificant that in January 2004, most of the 21 Albanian migrants who, in one tragic accident, were lost at sea trying to cross illegally to Italy came from the Shkodra region. Other events speak for themselves. Police operations have repeatedly targeted smugglers' networks. In December 2004, the police intercepted gunrunners smuggling MANPADS

SAM-7 type across the Montenegrin border. In March 2005, the police again successfully dismantled another network, seizing a number of remote controlled explosive devices smuggled in the same zone.

Field Station Shkodra also enjoys, as do the other field stations, close co-operation with local political, institutional, and civil society representatives.

Summary and Outlook

Albania has certainly seen remarkable changes take place over the last several years. Today's problems are the legacy of the last half century and of the collapse of the state structures in 1997. There is no quick-fix solution to remedy such profound and long-lasting social trauma, which has left Albanian society deeply scarred. The extent of the current political, social, economic, and psychological challenges cannot be underestimated. Improvements still remain to be implemented in a variety of fields, Euro-Atlantic integration being high on the agenda of the authorities. International support is, beyond any doubt, still needed for Albania. Above all, the duty of the OSCE Presence is to promote and actively support good governance practices. It goes without saying that this is done with the full co-operation of the Albanian State. At their level, the field stations contribute their fair share to strengthening the institutions and are an integral part of that demanding capacity-building process. If field stations pay attention to identifying problems, they are the earliest to witness the improvements occurring in their areas of responsibility. The genuine and close co-operation enjoyed with their Albanian interlocutors is a productive two-way process. It is also the clearest sign of the fact that the field stations' work and presence are highly appreciated by their local partners.

Today, Albania is at a crossroads. The conduct of the 2005 parliamentary elections and voter turnout figures will signal how far the country has gone down the path towards meeting the international standards. The field stations have been working actively to assist the Albanian authorities in preparing these elections. To exploit the potential of the assistance provided by the OSCE to Albania, the network of the field stations has to be maintained but their work will have to further adapt to the needs of the country and to the role the Organization will continue to play in supporting the progress of the country towards meeting not only OSCE standards, but also those of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Seen from the field perspective, this future work of the field stations should integrate information collection with an active implementation of programmatic activities, including larger, more ambitious projects.