

Transcript:

I was observing the parliamentary elections in Albania in May, 1996. [Enver] Hoxha died in 1985, after having ruled the communist country for four decades. [Albania] had become one of the poorest countries in Europe. After massive demonstrations, the communist Party of Labour of Albania (PLA or PPSH) allowed political pluralism in December, 1990, and the largest opposition party, the Democratic Party (PD), was founded the next day.

An election held in March, 1991, was won by the Labour Party, headed by [Ramiz] Alia, who appointed Fatos Nano as Prime Minister. After further demonstrations, a coalition government was formed, and in March 1992, the major opposition party, the Democratic party, led by Sali Berisha, won over the reformed communist party (PLA or PPSH), now called the Socialist Party (PS).

Berisha soon showed authoritarian signs. He had Nano arrested on charges of corruption, and Nano was regarded as a political prisoner by international human rights organizations.

Parliamentary elections were then held again four years later, in May, 1996. I was part of an observation team sent by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee. The Young Labour Party [Workers' Youth League – AUF] had also been invited by its sister party, the Socialists (PS), through the Socialist International to send observers. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry, who funded us, suggested that the labour youth (AUF) should be part of our delegations, which then consisted of 9 observers.

Our team was part of the ODIHR, which is the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights under the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The system of representation [for the 1996 Albanian parliamentary elections] was a mixed system. 115 members were elected from single-member constituencies by a two-round majority vote, and 25 were elected in a nationwide proportional system.

The two races were calculated independently, meaning that the system was a parallel system. This constituted a big change from the system used in 1992, where 100 were elected in single-member constituencies and 40 by PR. The previous system was a mixed-member proportional system, so that the total result was close to proportional. The change would benefit the largest party grossly.

This change was decided by the Democratic Party majority against all other parties in Parliament. When discussing with Democratic Party officials before the elections, they tried to convince us that the change was insignificant, with a reduction only from 40 to 25 proportional seats. But the big change was from mixed-member proportional to parallel (voting). ODIHR missed this point in their report.

Parallel systems are, of course, legitimate, but the process of change was far from good. After the pyramid scandal in 1997, the system was changed back to mixed-member proportional. And today it is a proportional system in multi-member constituencies.

Before the elections, there had been critical reports on restrictions on freedom of speech, state media bias, etc. On election day, observers reported a number of violations. I was in a counting center in Pogradec, where the ballots had clearly been tampered with. The ballot listed candidates and parties for the two races, and the voters should delete the candidates and parties they did not vote for, leaving one open.

In this counting center, up to 30% of the votes were declared invalid because all candidates were struck off. When inspecting the pile of invalid votes, we noted that the candidate for the Socialist Party (PS) was often struck out with a different pen or style, often with a green colour. We managed to get the Head of Constituency Commission to come to the counting center, and he just refused any wrongdoing. He said, "Well, I am not an expert on handwriting." But then he took me aside and said, "We will do whatever it takes to keep the Communists out."

The Social Party withdrew from the process that night, and they did not participate in the second round of elections.

When we were back in Tirana, the ODIHR debriefing was on its way. The same day, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly issued a statement before all observers had made their reports. The statement was quite understanding of the process.

ODIHR drafted after the debrief a very critical report. This was not well-received by part of the diplomatic corps, and ODIHR had to fly to Vienna [OSCE Headquarters] and consult before they could issue their reports. Meanwhile, the Norwegian [Helsinki Committee] and two British groups drafted a critical report. Before ODIHR had published theirs, we published ours. We published our own statement.

The fact that we published our own statement was, of course, against all rules, since we were part of the OSCE mission. However, we were afraid that the truth would not come out, and we published it before we left the country. We believe that this made it difficult for the OSCE in Vienna [OSCE] to dilute ODIHR's statement.

Later, I headed a number of ODIHR observation missions, where we were very strict on the rule that no observer could talk to the press or issue a statement before ODIHR had issued their statement. We also tried to avoid any statements for Parliamentarians to be issued before the reports of all observers were reported to the headquarters.

The Democratic Party was very surprised when they realized that the Western organizations were critical to the process. They were pro-Europe, using the EU flag in their campaign and counted on Western support in keeping the Communists out. The day following the election, riots broke out in Tirana, with gangs of Democratic Party and the Secret police beating up opposition figures and even observers.

For me, this mission had strange consequences. I had worked with somebody who called themselves the British Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. They were not a member of the Helsinki Committee International Federation, but I worked with them in 1991 and 1992 in Moldova. Now, I met them again. They did not split up into teams of two. They were not part of the ODIHR mission, and they traveled as a (separate) group in a minibus. They did not report on serious violations, and they issued a statement, which was rather positive [on the conduct of the election].

Later, the group became famous for supporting authoritarian leaders in Slovakia, Ukraine, Serbia, etc. In Slovakia, they were given airtime 30 times, and we had them on record to talk down OSCE and also, me, personally. They said I had been supporting Hoxha in the 1970s, when I, in fact, was a student politician opposing the Maoists, which became very powerful at the University of Oslo. This they had also published in Albanian newspapers, together with claims that we had been given cars by the Socialist party.

This was based on a fax they had picked up in the Socialist headquarters. It is true that Labour Youth (AUF) had been offered such logistics when they were invited as a sister party. That would have been totally legitimate. However, when they became part of our mission, they were told that we could not take any support from a party, and we organized our own logistics.

It felt really surreal for me that they went against us with personal attacks, without even contacting me. But that is how it went.