

US Train cannot wait forever in the Albanian station

By Xhavit Shala

About a month before the official electoral campaign¹ for July 3, 2005 started, the two main Albanian political forces entered into a race of who was able to show who had the highest “shares” in Washington, and consequently which one would have the majority in the upcoming parliament.²

The use of foreign advisory teams and organizational approaches that both political parties employed in their Party conventions was a clear indicator of the modernization and maturity of those political groups and a telling demonstration of their efforts to respond to the elevated level of voters. This campaign, however, still could not brake with certain elements present in what has become an Albanian tradition.

The campaign of the main opposition party will be managed by an affiliate of BG&R, a company that managed President Bush’s campaign and which is headed by Ambassador Blackwell, former Deputy Assistant and Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Planning to President Bush. This is meant to show to the Albanians that the US administration favors the opposition³. On the other hand, Bruce Jackson of Democracies in Transition tried to present the opposition leader as an adversary of the US, embarrassing even the US Embassy in the process.⁴

Having a several hours distance with the western hemisphere, the managers for the campaigns of both parties tried to convince Albanians that they were “on line” with President Bush and the US government and each claimed the administration’s full support.

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² The article was published in “Korrieri” newspaper on 26.5.2005, under the title “The electoral propaganda and national security.” The article was also subsequently placed on the ACNSS webpage www.acnss.com

³ "Without a new leadership, without changes in governance, the future of Albania would be in danger. I have full confidence that Berisha has the intellectual skills, dedication, power, energy, honesty, courage, hope and optimism, to lead Albania through the creation of jobs, revitalization of the economy, liberate businesses from the burden of bribes, generating investments and improving basic services, " BG&R CEO, Leni Griffith, said at a press conference when introducing the company.

⁴ - “Berisha has been a destructive force in the politics of Southeastern Europe. He has done nothing to help Kosova, and economic development data of the country when he was in power were deplorable,” Bruce Jackson, the President of "Democracies in Transition Project," said in Tirana, on June 25, 2005.

Seemingly, the two main Albanian political parties have not caught up to the fact that Albanian voters are not as they once were in the beginning of the democratic processes. The status of the US Company BG&R was clarified by Ambassador Marcie Ries who through an interview at Vision Plus TV station said that this was just an agreement on commercial services, meaning that this has no links with the official policy of United States.

“The U.S. and its European partners consider the July 3d elections very important,” US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, Nicolas Burns, said as he was reminding the Albanian politicians. Meanwhile, the Republican, Christopher Smith, Co-Chairman of Helsinki Commission, reminded the government of Albania that the main responsibility for holding free and fair elections fell on it. “We want to have to deal with a government that is elected by the people, with a real democracy and if there is vote rigging, this would bring consequences and implications as it concerns our foreign policy towards other countries”⁵

The opinion that US will tolerate elections fraud for the sake of strategic interests is totally wrong. The U.S. is seeking to establish these standards today even in the Middle East, where, for the sake of stability there, it used to make concessions. President Bush is himself pushing the democratic processes in the Arab countries. “It is time now to make clear that the decades of justifications and support of tyranny for the sake of stability have led to injustice, instability and tragedies. Authoritarian regimes are not the way forward; they are only the echoes of discredited past.” At a time when the US and the EU are seeking to establish democratic standards even in the Middle East, there is no reason to expect that they will accept the irregularities that might take place in the Albanian elections. Therefore, they are now more solid in their demands than ever before.

The Americans have given a clear message to Albanian politicians in Albania and in Kosova. The message is that Albanians have the full support of the U.S. to solve their issues on the path of Euro Atlantic integration and resolution of the final status of Kosova. America has no favorites in these elections. It will be up to the Albanians to make the choice of who wins.

Another important message is that America has no intentions to leave unresolved problems in the Balkans, or to tolerate the creation of new problems. It will work to “clear things up” during 2005 – 2006, because there are still many other pending problems elsewhere that need to be solved such as North Korea and Iran. Therefore, Albanians in Albania and Kosova must understand that the American “train” has no time to lose in their station and the number of stations in the Balkans where this train can stop is increasing.

In closing, the U.S. has no favorites among our political parties. The only preference they have in Albania is for free and fair elections. U.S. Congressman Engel says that it is very

⁵ - Christopher Smith: “nothing harms democracy more than manipulated elections,” statement made during an interview for the VOA journalist, Keida Kostreci, aired on May 23, 2005.

important for Albania to hold free and fair elections, so the people can know that their choice will be respected every time there is an election. If the elections were to fail, he warns, an appropriate environment for drug traffickers and terrorists would be created and Albania could enter the category of failed states.