

## **INTERVIEW WITH HEAD OF PRESENCE, AMBASSADOR BRUCE BERTON**

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**Mr. Ambassador, welcome to the Albanian Radio and Television. The final OSCE-ODIHR Report on the local elections of May 14 was published a few days ago. For the first time, the Report spelled out clearly that the law enforcement bodies must investigate all instances of vote distortion. In your opinion, what is the explanation for Albania not being able to overcome the debate of influencing the electoral processes?**

Thank you very much for the opportunity to talk today. I would like to start out by just talking a little bit about ODIHR – the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights – that is one of the three independent institutions of the OSCE. They are most well-known for the way that they monitor elections and surely enough they were here for the May elections. Generally speaking, there were several positive aspects to the elections, the voting was generally free and fair, voter lists were accurate, the counting went well, but I think there were also some specific deficiencies that they noted in the report. They came up with a total of 27 recommendations, eight of there were what they call priority recommendations. They deal with issues like vote buying, like electoral malfunction, secrecy of voting, influence of media on the voting, etc. So, the best way from our perspective to tackle these things is to a look at those recommendations and to try and do the best job that they can to respond to those recommendations very specifically, and I think the key for voters not just in Albania, but everywhere is to ensure that the citizens trust the process. You increase the trust, then you increase the turnout, and trust in the institutions is very important.

**In your experience as an ambassador what would be the mechanism in Albania that could remove the hands of the parties from influencing the electoral processes?**

There is always going to be involvement of the parties in the electoral process and it is not necessarily a negative thing. In fact, here in Albania all the political parties, prior to an election, actually have to sign a commitment that they will not engage in any electoral malpractice, and in fact they will compete with honesty and integrity. I think for us and I would like to make a quote here from the report here if you don't mind, what ODIHR concluded is that "political parties failed to live up to the considerable rights and responsibilities given to them under the Electoral Code". So, there was some concern and has been in previous elections about not just the rights of political parties, but their responsibilities and how well they executed them. I think prime example of course would be liberally recalling and replacing their commission members, particularly at the lower levels. And I think one thing that we can do, I am going to harp on this over and over, is to take a look at the recommendations that were actually made. Whether we are talking about vote buying, specific things related to the election administration, campaign financing, the role of media all these things can be tackled and improve the electoral atmosphere here.

**Soon we expect the ad hoc parliamentary committee to start working and they haven't worked for along time. In your opinion, from where should the ad hoc parliamentary committee start working?**

We welcome the Assembly's decision on 21 September to reconstitute the ad hoc committee and from our point of view and I repeat this again the best place to start is with the specific

recommendations from the ODIHR report not from just this election in May, but there have been election observations from ODIHR in many previous elections here in Albania as well, and there are recommendations left over from those elections that have not yet been addressed so I think that would be a good place to start. One of the things that I would like to talk about is the out-of-country voting. That is not something that ODIHR specifically addressed this time, because it does not exist at the current moment so that is something that the OSCE Presence is going to make as a priority in this upcoming sort of window of opportunity. What I mean by window of opportunity is that you have a certain amount of time between one election and the next election in order to get the types of reforms that Albania is looking for completed, and we have to leave sufficient time to implement those changes and also sufficient time before the next elections come upon us. So we need to take advantage of that window of opportunity now. Tomorrow we will have actually a national conference on out-of-country voting and it will bring together hopefully what are all the players – the parliamentary committees, assembly members, the diaspora, international partners, etc. – and what we hope comes out of that is a path forward, some recommendations that we can then continue to work on throughout this process. That is also the beginning of a project on electoral reform in Albania that is funded by the governments of Sweden and Switzerland and Poland. Tomorrow's conference is the first activity that we are undertaking as part of that four-year project.

**The opposition currently is in a difficult situation within its ranks. Do you think that the ambiguity of who leads the largest opposition party will damage the electoral reform, in your opinion?**

Having an effective opposition I think is a good for any functioning democracy, so if there is ambiguity there then, yes, it might have some implications. What we would like to see of course is that those committee positions are filled, that the opposition actually comes together so that there is no space in between the different factions so that we can move forward with the types of reforms that I believe the country is looking for.

**I am going back to the election pre-preparatory processes. Should technology be applied in elections in Albania? Do you think that the time has come?**

The use of technology has increased over the years, not just in Albania, but virtually in all of the OSCE participating States, including my own country. And I think it actually has many advantages: it speeds up the tabulation of the counting; it reduces the possibility of human error; it reduces the possibility of possible electoral malpractice by those who might try and influence the elections in one way or another. And so, I think there are many advantages to do it. However, it needs to be done in a fairly careful way too, in order to continue to ensure the secrecy of the vote, in order to make sure that electoral workers – the people who are in the commissions and elsewhere – have had a good training on how to use the technology, but also there needs to be a public education campaign about how that will affect the individual votes. We had two recommendations associated with this and I think for me the most important one is dedicating the adequate time and resources to make sure that everything is in place before we move forward with the adoption of new technologies.

**There is a constant request from the Central Election Commission to depoliticize the second- and third-level election administration commissions. In your opinion, is this possible?**

I think it is possible, yes. And that has been a long-standing recommendation of ODIHR in terms of elections here in Albania. The point that I would like to emphasize is that although of course parties play an important role in the electoral process, the administration of elections does not belong to the parties. The electoral administration needs to be done in an apolitical way, which means that they set the stage for the political parties to compete against one another, but that the political parties cannot influence that process. And I think one of the chief methods for improving and depoliticizing the electoral process is for an additional effort at training the workers who will administer the elections. I think for us that is very important, because you form this congregate of people who are election professionals as opposed to people from the parties who come in for a short time. And in that way, you eventually depoliticize the administration of elections.

**I would like to stop a little bit on the media given that it is one of the most important estates not only in Albania but in the entire world. In Albania, the situation is complex, the environment has changed a lot. How do you see the media in Albania, Mr. Ambassador?**

I have had some time with some journalists and that has been beneficial for me to find out more about the media landscape here. If you look at the most recent media freedom index of the Reporters Without Borders, Albania has actually improved by several spots on the annual index between 2022 and 2023. But that does not mean that there are not challenges that are out there. There are. I think, first, attacks on journalists – whether we are talking about physical attacks or acts of intimidation – cannot be tolerated, and that has been an issue here. We have just seen cyberattacks in the recent days on a couple of media outlets here. I think the issue of somewhat murky ownership sometimes of media outlets; self-censorship on the part of reporters, and I think there is of course room for improvement there. Specifically, in this report, ODIHR noted that there was an absence of independent media. In other words, the media outlets chose to choose sides as opposed to acting independently. And I think that one of those clear pieces of evidence and something that would be a welcome gesture is the elimination of those packaged pieces, packages tapes that are sent to the media outlets and oftentimes run on different media outlets but without attribution that there are actually packaged pieces from the parties.

**My last question. When we hear about the OSCE, there is always an interest to understand what are the areas where the OSCE mission assists for the development of democracy here in Albania?**

The OSCE mandate is broad here in Albania, since the day we came into existence in the country in 1997. We worked over the years to become a trusted partner. And I think there is some evidence that we are in fact trusted. There was a poll that was done last November that indicated that the OSCE was one of the top three trusted institutions here in Albania, along with the US and the EU. To me, that means a couple of things: that we are indeed a trusted partner, but also that the trust in the state institutions, in the politicians, in civil society is not at the level where it needs to be. So, we will continue our work. And as I mention, it is quite broad – whether we are talking about human trafficking, whether we are talking about rule of law, anti-corruption work, environmental concerns, support of law-enforcement institutions, our support to the Assembly, our efforts on electoral reform of course, and our support to the Constitutional Court and other state institutions. We do not do anything that the institutions here in Albania do not want us to do. We co-operate fully with them, and that hopefully will be the case in the future as well.

**Mr. Ambassador, thank you for this interview for the Albanian Radio and Television.**

You are very welcome.

**Ends**