

Remarks by Head of OSCE Presence, Ambassador Eugen Wollfarth, following a meeting with the President of the National Council of People with Disabilities and of the Association of the Blind People, Mr. Sinan Tafaj

TIRANA - 20 July 2012

Ambassador Wollfarth: Today is the day. I was looking forward to it since Dr. Tafaj invited me quite some time ago to visit him at the seat of the Association of the Blind, and today I am here with some members of my team. We talked about aspects of inclusion. Members of a very important part of the civil society that are suffering disabilities should be helped to find themselves as full-fledged members of society. For that, they need support at all levels. The consciousness about the issue has risen in Albania, but it should be even higher. What blind people need, what also other people with disabilities need, and bring them to better life, to lift the standards and make life easier for the people with disabilities to arrive in the centre of the society. The OSCE Presence in Albania strongly supports that goal. We have also some activities together. We do this work in support of the people with disabilities also together with international partners and important foundations here in Albania. Also very important we find the discussions the Youth Forum is having, lively discussions leading to a better life in Albania. When making new laws, when making new legislation, it is equally important that civil society, including people with disabilities, are being heard. These are issues we want to put forward, legitimate areas of cooperation in support of civil society, and especially in support of people with disabilities. Dr. Tafaj told me that he is planning with his Association special events for October. We will gladly join this effort, and I would like to thank him again for this invitation. I was really looking forward to be here today. Dr. Tafaj, thank you very much and we will continue to support the work in favour of people with disabilities.

Question: Even though the Albanian Government is supporting people with disabilities by encouraging employment policies for them, the government has adopted a change to the law on people with disabilities by reducing compensation for this category of people. Do you think that this Government decision, which has somewhat created reactions among people with disabilities, is fair?

Ambassador Wollfarth: It's very important that people with disabilities find the support they need from the society to live a life as normal as possible. Therefore, some support for their living expenses, I would say, is a fair contribution of society to make their lives as normal as possible. I understand also from our observation that living expenses for people with disabilities are somewhat higher than for completely normal persons. So, some support is fair, and justified... how high and in which form that is solved, and how the balance is found, that indeed depends on negotiations, it depends on the budget, it also depends on special agreements, particularly when it includes private partners, which in this case is an electricity providing company.

Question: Meanwhile, the Albanian Government has not yet signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, but it has already started with amending some laws. Is that how it should function? Should amendments to laws be made before the Convention is ratified?

Ambassador Wollfarth: The important issue for me is that people with disabilities are helped by society and that we see a high degree of consciousness; that they need support,

including support from the government. When I say government I mean not only national government. Much can be done also through the local government at the local level and through the society living at that level – in the towns, municipalities, villages - to help to make life of people with disabilities easier and also work on inclusiveness. As for the sequence of how that is being achieved, there are different possibilities.

Q: Actually, one of the criteria for Albania's accession into the EU is the integration of some categories, which include also persons with disabilities. Meanwhile, persons with disabilities themselves feel worse now than four or five years ago. They say that with time their rights are being reduced, therefore the benefits they have gained are being reduced, at a time when we are about to ratify the Convention, which means that they should have better rights than four or five years ago, i.e. we are going towards regress rather than progress.

Ambassador Wollfarth: I am very thankful for this question. I think Doctor Tafaj can answer much better than me since he is living his life in Albania throughout the years. I am here for two years now. I see some progress during these two years. I see also areas where discussion still goes on, including the question I just answered. It is a constant challenge. It is about consciousness and also what can be done. Dr. Tafaj, before you speak I would like to add that from the viewpoint of OSCE Presence in Albania it is very important to think about the challenges a person with disabilities has to live with to be a normal member of the society. These people need support. We are offering co-operation and we are co-operating with the National Council of People with Disabilities, and with the Association of the Blind. And I would invite more civil society to join these efforts and also the authorities to do the utmost of what they can do in support of people with disabilities.

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