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## **Interview with Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Osmo Lipponen**

**Q: How would you define Albania with regards to its political climate, will, and its development (property issues, and the electoral reform and the law)?**

Albania is very much in transition and I definitely wish for things to be better. The topics you mentioned are a good example of a new kind of political will. The process that we have seen and that has been taking place in the discussions about the electoral law is extremely constructive and reflects something new compared to when you look back a few years into the Albanian political history. This process has created a new kind of confidence though it is still a little bit shaky. I hope this confidence will also be reflected in the discussion we are having on the property restitution law. If these two processes go positive and forward, that will have a multiplying effect on the politics. One thing that is still needed is much more transparency in the administration and in the political system.

**Q: What are the things that Albania needs to do very well and quick enough in order to walk side by side with other countries towards the European integration?**

The European Commission is the right address to answer this question, but having been involved in an integration process in Finland and being posted in Croatia, which has been in a similar SAA process like Albania, I would like to go back to what I have said at the end of the previous question about the openness of the administration. The integration mostly requires an open society. The civic rights and liberties, and access to information are among the pillars of the European Union.

**Q: How do you assess the fact that Albania has aligned itself with the US and the Great Britain in the Iraqi conflict?**

It is the perfect right of an independent state to decide on its foreign policy.

**Q: Does Albania risk its integration in Europe because of the Iraqi issue, keeping in mind that the European countries also disagree among each other in this matter?**

No, I would not think so, because the choice of opinions within the European countries and the European Union varies from against or for to somewhere in between, and that is part of the European Union. The foreign policy co-ordination is the last part of the united European policies and individual countries have their own, strong opinions. This might affect the efforts within the Union to go to the next step of the internal reforms.

**Q: What is your role in Albania?**

The role of the OSCE in Albania has been very strong and constructive. As far as I see it, it is now becoming even more important and constructive than before. Of course, the times are changing, but with the excellent work the Presence is doing we have earned our role in the processes in Albania, but that role has to be earned every week. When it comes

to my role, it is one of keeping the OSCE Presence's participation in the processes constructive, so that they result in the best possible product, if I can put it that way. My role is also to maintain the connection with the government and as much as possible with the international community so that the activities of all of us are harmonized.

**Q: What is the first thing you did when you came in the country?**

First of all I listened to my people. I had very intensive briefings and after that I had discussions with the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister and the President. I had extremely intensive introductions to Albania and the Albanian politics.

**Q: How is the life of the OSCE Ambassador in Albania like?**

I have to say that it has been very much work, work and work. But the work has brought me also to very interesting surroundings and to meeting very interesting people. So let us say my leisure time has been taking place mostly through the work.

**Q: Can you tell us something about your family, what they do and where are they living now?**

I come from a family with country traditions, but a normal family. In the past, in my parents' generation, they earned merits for the country. It was one of the families with the highest military decorations, but otherwise we are quite a normal family. It happens to be that my brother is still a Prime Minister, but like in any other normal family we have people who are unemployed and those who have normal jobs, kids who are studying. We just have a normal life, with all its difficulties and pleasures.

My wife Sheryl is an American. She is with me here in Albania now. We altogether have three kids, one in Finland and two in the United States.

**Q: What are your hobbies and can you satisfy them in Albania?**

I have to say I do not have any time for my hobbies. In Zagreb, before I came here, I kept playing ice hockey, but as you know there is no ice ring in Tirana, so I cannot keep on skating. I have so many sports injuries that I cannot run, but still I could skate and I really miss that.

**Q: What would you like to do after your diplomatic mission in Tirana?**

I wish that it would be something at least as equally challenging and important as my work here. And that is very difficult to achieve. Anyway, I will still have many years left in my career and it depends on many factors where I will end up. Probably I will be an Ambassador somewhere, unless I will have some other type of an international task waiting for me, but it is a little bit too early to make such plans. This job that I have here is very challenging and I really enjoy it.