

**Interview of the Head of OSCE Presence in Albania, Ambassador Eugen Wollfarth,
with Deutsche Welle**

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Mr Ambassador, the Albanian Assembly recently decided to extend the time for the ad hoc committee on Electoral Code Reform. Notwithstanding the international community's systematic appeals that call for the reform's implementation as soon as possible, and the statements made by political actors on the readiness to work together on this issue, the steps taken actually seem to be rather sluggish, and many weighty issues related to the electoral reform have not been considered yet. In your view, do you think that the review of the OSCE/ODIHR observing missions' recommendations may be finalised in time, or that the electoral reform will be finalised in a last-minute effort, as it has often happened in the past?

All political sides need to read the 2009 and 2011 OSCE/ODIHR reports in their totality. The recommendations contained in the reports now need to be transformed into a successful electoral code reform. The reform needs to be completed on time and well before elections. Greater political will needs to be shown. The Ad Hoc Committee on Electoral Code Reform is working and progress is becoming visible. Yet there is a clear need to speed up and intensify the process as a number of key topics are yet to be discussed. What matters most is content! That is why we need to see a timely but also qualitative conclusion to the process, one that has to come as a result of a constructive work from all sides. Ultimately this is an Albanian process and it is up to Albanians to deliver. Albanians have to want it more than the international community. I urge the Committee and every single member to make the best use of what time is left until the end of April in order to achieve a thorough and high quality reform. Last-minute action is clearly not good enough and will not do this time!

What is the OSCE Presence in Albania's actual engagement in the electoral code reform?

The OSCE Presence is encouraged to see a start to the process and is following it closely. As part of an OSCE Presence project in support of the electoral reform process, and with funding from the United Kingdom, the OSCE/ODIHR is providing technical assistance to the Ad Hoc Committee. OSCE/ODIHR experts have made regular visits to Tirana in the last two months during which they have met with relevant national actors and have provided technical expertise to draft amendments already discussed in the Ad Hoc Committee. Next week, the Presence is assisting the Ad Hoc Committee in organising a major roundtable on electoral code reform with the participation of MPs, politicians, civil society and international experts from OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission. I am convinced that this will be a very positive and successful event.

Q: For over a decade, the OSCE Presence has been assisting the Albanian authorities in regards to the property reform. In practice, this process has been advancing very slowly,

even though everybody knows that the missing solution of the property issues is not only a source of conflicts, but also one of the motives that hampers and discourages domestic and foreign investments, which are so much needed by the Albanian economy. In your view, what is hindering the solution of the property problem in Albania?

Private and public investment and lending remain hindered when property ownership cannot be guaranteed. These issues will remain unresolved until progress is made in developing a comprehensive property reform strategy. A strategy is also needed to provide certainty, remove conflicts, and form the basis of economic development. The strategy should produce a clear and comprehensive vision. The strategy should develop and reflect a public consensus as to the desired destination of reforms, and set out concrete steps and a reasonable and realistic timeline in which to reach that destination. While the strategy cannot fully satisfy all partners it must represent a compromise that stakeholders can find fair in order that the reforms are to be sustainable. Another concern is the unresolved claims of the former property owners for compensation or restitution of property confiscated during the former regime. Up to date, too few former owners have had their claims resolved. The process is slowed by a debate over the authority of the agency responsible to resolve the issue. There appears to be also a lack of transparency and consultation in the drafting of property related legislation. Co-ordination between Government and the relevant state agencies needs strengthening as currently there is unnecessary inefficiency and duplication of effort. The lack of an apparent strategic framework has also resulted in poor planning and the insufficient allocation of budget resources to ensure that property laws are fully implemented.

The OSCE Presence has implemented and is still implementing some projects related to good governance, one of whose key aspects is the war on corruption. If we were to refer to reliable international reports on the Albanian public's perception of the corruption levels, it can be noticed that the statistical data either remain unaltered or they have actually worsened. How do you evaluate this situation?

In fighting corruption, the Government was able to pass amendments to the Criminal Code related to acts of corruption by foreign officials and for imposing significant penalties for corruption in the private sector. Progress was made by the High Inspectorate for the Declaration and Audit of Assets, including a rise in the prosecution of corrupt junior and mid level officials. The introduction of electronic procurement systems in public administration also reduces contact between contracting authorities and bidders, thus reducing opportunities for corruption. Yet, efforts to pursue senior state officials accused of corruption remains an issue, not helped by a lack of follow up by the Prosecution office. Immunity of senior public officials also remains an important issue to be addressed. A stronger track record of trial verdicts and appropriate sentencing and/or fines in corruption cases involving senior officials is important in restoring public confidence. Ultimately, the fight against corruption will only succeed when all political sides work together instead of misusing it for partisan self interest.

After being refused twice the European Union's candidate status, do you believe that Albania will be finally granted the candidate status this autumn?

This is a question to be directed rather to EU representatives. However, for moving ahead with the reform agenda, I would like to say that a decisive tackling and constructive co-operation in all key areas of reform with and inside the Assembly as a driving force for joint decision making will once again be decisive whether Albania will move forward or not. I am optimistic that considerable headway can be achieved. It is entirely in the hands of Albania.