

## HEAD OF PRESENCE'S INTERVIEW WITH VIZION PLUS TV ON ELECTORAL REFORM

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*Interviewed by: Olta Blaceri*

**Vizion Plus:** Mr. Ambassador, the electoral reform, which started in 2017, has been interrupted several times. In January, the ruling majority and the opposition sat together to finalize the reform. Is it now high time for electoral reform to be finalized by 31 May, so today, as you also have said?

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “You are completely right. It is high time to come to a conclusion. We as the OSCE Presence and our sister organization from Warsaw, ODIHR, have been supporting this crucial reform process now already for a long time, and we hope to see final and complete results, implementation of the reform which cover all the recommendations very soon. Therefore, we were of course very happy to see all political forces getting together in the so-called Political Council to deliberate and to discuss about these matters. Still, I continue to be encouraged that they continue with that. They met yesterday, they are going to meet today again. I am also a bit optimistic as on many of our recommendations there are already discernible solutions – not yet clearly formulated, but discernible solutions. Not on all maybe. Let me underline that the reform is crucial. Albania wants to get closer to the EU and this is an EU precondition.”

**Vizion Plus:** Albania has not had an electoral reform since 2012, and the OSCE/ODIHR has made tens of recommendations. Do you support a full depoliticization of the electoral commissions? This topic is one the deadlocks of the reform because of the opposition's refusal.

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “Yes, you are completely right. This is one of the recommendations on which the debate is still ongoing quite intensively, indeed. We fully support the idea of a full depoliticization of the election administration, in order to eliminate all grounds for suspicion and contestation. The politicians and politically-appointed individuals in the electoral administration represent a backdoor open to contestations. A full depoliticization of the election administration serves to the interest of the citizens, preventing political deals to the detriment of fair elections. The reform of election administration is urged – it is one of our oldest recommendations, and it is also urgent because it has also to be implemented. The Central Election Commission, which would probably have then a different composition as well, would have to implement it on the other levels as well, so that takes time.”

**Vizion Plus:** There is a new request from the opposition that the Constitutional Court should adjudicate on electoral complaints. How do you consider this?

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “This is an interesting debate, which is a new idea. It is certainly better than to rely on people who have not yet been vetted, on which you cannot 100 per cent rely. So, involving the highest courts it is certainly an option.”

**Vizion Plus:** Do you consider as feasible the request of the opposition for electronic biometric identification across the country and for a pilot project on electronic voting and counting?

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “Let me first of all underline that now we are touching issues which are not part of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. This is something that is possible. I know of two OSCE participating States that are implementing biometric identification. So, in principle, this is possible. This needs a consensus and it needs rapidly a consensus, because it takes time to implement that – you need to do a procurement process, you need to set it up, calibrate it, fill it with the data, test it, so that nothing goes wrong on the election day. So my concern is the time – this has to happen very soon. If it is decided, of course, we will support Albania in implementing it. But this is purely an Albanian decision.”

**Vizion Plus:** How do you consider the request of some political actors for the change of electoral system? Even the US Ambassador in Tirana proposed a change of the electoral system by suggesting the Danish model.

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “I have of course understanding and even some sympathy for the wish to change the electoral system, but this needs a strong majority. It needs for most of the proposals debated the change even of the Constitution, so two thirds of the votes in parliament. And at the moment it seems to be that this majority has not yet been achieved. It is a crucial discussion, with manifold repercussions, and all that needs then also implementation steps. But also there I must add that neither OSCE, nor ODIHR recommend electoral systems. There are many legitimate systems, and this is an Albanian decision, and not ours. Once there is a decision, of course we would support the implementation.”

**Vizion Plus:** Are law amendments enough to have elections that meet the OSCE/ODIHR standards? Does the law alone fight the vote-buying phenomenon or is it the political will that has a dominant role in this process?

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “Vote buying is a serious problem, sure. ODIHR considered it top priority among its recommendations. Proactive measures by the Prosecution, and better co-operation with other law-enforcement bodies, like the police, to investigate electoral crimes are also recommended in the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. Therefore, we are very positive that there are concrete ideas to strengthen the role of the police and of the prosecution in this context. So, there seems already to be an emerging consensus on that.

Law amendments, if properly implemented and unequivocally addressing real problems, are a crucial step ahead, sure. But it needs also the political will to adopt such amendments and the political will to implement them in good faith. After 2017 elections, we made some more recommendations on that field, like a concrete and genuine commitment from political parties to combat vote-buying practices, in addition a public refusal of politicians to accept financial support from individuals with a criminal past. Also that would help to build public trust in the integrity of the election process.

But let’s not forget that there are other issues in this context, like for instance, abuse of State resources, pressure on public employees, also the unethical practice of distributing ready-made tapes and then having them screened without any identification that this comes from parties and not from journalists. So, there is still quite something to do.”

**Vizion Plus:** Would a caretaker government solve electoral problems in Albania, as claimed by the opposition?

**Ambassador Borchardt:** “This is again an issue, which requires political consensus, and so far I do not discern or feel this consensus. But, it is again a decision to be taken by Albania and the Albanians, and the parties in parliament and outside of parliament. There is no obligation, no recommendation from us to do that, but it is something that is possible.”

**Ends**