

**INTERVIEW OF THE HEAD OF THE OSCE PRESENCE IN ALBANIA,
AMBASSADOR EUGEN WOLLFARTH, *DIPLOMATICUS*, NEWS24 TV**
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By Erjona Rusi

Journalist: Good evening everyone! The end of April is coming, and it marks the final deadline for finalizing the electoral reform process, an exceptionally important process considering that it constitutes one of the main points and criteria of the European Commission for Albania's status of EU candidate country. In other words, the success or failure of this very important process will have a major bearing on whether Albania's application this Autumn will be rejected for the third time or not. This evening we will be speaking precisely about this and other issues with one of the important Ambassadors accredited to our country, the Head of the OSCE Presence in Tirana, Mr. Eugen Wollfarth. Good evening and welcome to *Diplomaticus*.

Journalist: Welcome Mr. Ambassador, and thank you for accepting our invitation to be here with us on *Diplomaticus*.

Ambassador Wollfarth: "Thank you for the invitation and glad to have you here, Good evening!"

Journalist: Good evening, Mr. Ambassador you have been here for more than a year and a half now. Perhaps you could give us some short comments on the time you have been here in Albania.

Ambassador Wollfarth: "First of all, I like being in Albania. It is a very beautiful country with a lot of variations from countryside to countryside - the mountains, the sea, the valleys and nice people living there - which I have tried to discover over these last 18 months that I have been here."

Journalist: So, you have travelled a lot then?

Ambassador Wollfarth: "Quite a bit. I have travelled also to the regions. I managed to travel to a series of important towns and cities like Korca, Fier, Shkodra, Kukes, Saranda, Durres, and I will not forget the capital, Tirana, and very close to Tirana, Elbasan. So, a number of important places, also including smaller ones, some of which in really beautiful areas like Valbona or Himara to make a large contrast. That way, I also tried to learn more about Albania, about its present times, what is needed now, but also about the great traditions. Discovering this part of Europe is for a German citizen like me very nice."

Journalist: Do you feel at home?

Ambassador Wollfarth: "A little bit, yes, because there is a common spirit that European people have and I feel it growing here. I worked a couple of years ago in a neighbouring region and I liked that very much too, so I am not a newcomer to the Balkans, and I like it."

Journalist: You are fond of the Western Balkans then?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is a beautiful area. Unfortunately there are quite some challenges that still need solutions and that is of course also an important part of our work here.”

Journalist: Let us focus a little bit on Albania and then we will probably talk about Western Balkans again. Do you think there have been more positive or negative developments here in our country during your time in Albania,?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “There is one extremely important development, that is that the parliament seems to be viable now. That was not the case when I arrived in autumn 2010. Now the parliament has had the opportunity to come to very important decisions like electing the Ombudsman at the end of last year, which was a very good step. Other important work is going on like the judicial reform. I hope to see very soon decision-making on Administrative Courts. A very important item then is the electoral reform being tackled and discussed by the Ad Hoc Committee, which will hopefully soon lead to a solution.”

Journalist: So, things have changed a little bit for the better since you came to Albania?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Yes. I would praise that development of the parliament as the most important step. Of course, there were more developments in that time. A very important step for the Albanians – where we helped to prepare the grounds with preparations regarding the civil registry, and address system, which were then very decisive elements – was the visa liberalisation for an important number of countries. This is not a completely finished task, but Albania is progressing on one hand, while more progress needs to be seen on the other.”

Journalist: Let us talk a little bit about important topics and you mentioned the Ad Hoc Committee on Electoral Reform. Are you satisfied with the work done till now on this committee?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “So far, very good work has been done. It is not finished yet. The deadline was extended up until the end of April, so there are few days left. However, not all the questions are solved yet. It is very important to continue in that spirit of co-operation and dialogue. That does not mean that everybody and all the members of the electoral committee or the related parties have to instantly have the same opinion. It means to develop an Electoral Code or changes to the Code, leading then next year to good, free, fair and transparent general elections. That will be very important and I am optimistic that they will manage to do that.”

Journalist: Since the deadline is approaching, do you think that the majority and the opposition will finalize the electoral reform according to OSCE/ODIHR recommendations and, if not, what will happen?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “As I said, I am optimistic. Time is there and I see also a large extent of good will to come to that solution. There might be in parliamentary life some additional discussions necessary after the Electoral Committee will have developed a draft Electoral Code, and a discussion might also be necessary in the

other committees, the Law Committee for example, before coming to decisions, but it is for the parliament to decide how to proceed. However, in many cases, the members on the Law Committee are also on the Ad Hoc Committee, so I see good chances that a good decision, a good, new Electoral Code will be brought to life.”

Journalist: In time..?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “In time, which would mean, this is not a question of half an hour or so, but before the summer break – yes.”

Journalist: In an interview last October, if I am correct, you stated that a dialogue should begin between the majority and the opposition, not blaming but dialogue. Do you think there is a real dialogue right now, because the perception of the media and public is that the blame game still continues every day maybe not only regarding the electoral reform, but other topics as well.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Discussions regarding the judicial reform, including the Administrative Court Reform or Parliamentary Reform need engagement. Many of these key pieces of required legislation need a qualified majority, which means that the large parties, including the coalition on the majority’s side, and also hopefully the coalition on the side of the opposition, come together and find that big, common ground needed to reach sixty per cent to pass these laws and make them stable for a long time to come. What Albania needs is also stability, stability for its integration aspirations and also for investors to have a longer period and a safe period ahead for good business that then creates jobs. That dialogue leads hopefully to social peace and understanding, and also to legal development, which is required for integration steps.”

Journalist: But do you think there is a real dialogue right now?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is growing...”

Journalist: It is growing?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is growing. Some spicy comments are probably part of every political life. Every country has its traditions. It is very important that whatever is going on on the noisy side, dialogue, constructive co-operation, and willingness to reach compromise is there. Let me add a word: it seems that the word ‘compromise’ is not fully understood yet. Compromise is the essence of what we have in many of our countries and certainly what we needed for European integration. It is a larger group of people, it is people entering, who have a common, fundamental and broad understanding, and that can only be reached with compromise. It is impossible to reach that when every group or even little groups insist to get everything they want. Everybody has to give and will also take, but that fair balance is needed and it is reachable. I do not see any reason why it cannot be reached here in Albania. Therefore, I would invite for a more positive approach to compromise, because then the country wins.”

Journalist: It comes naturally to me to ask you something. When you say compromise, is not well understood here, you mean Albanian politicians do not understand this compromise thing? It is not the people?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is very important not to think in terms of “the winner gets it all”. The winner must be the Albanian people, and hopefully all the Albanian people. Therefore, it cannot be one group that wins everything.”

Journalist: Let us talk about the election of the President that is really a hot topic right now in Albania. Just a few days ago, you stated that the Constitution allows the majority to elect the President, but the time left must be properly used to find important candidates. If I am correct, this statement of yours has been interpreted in the media and by some people as a deviation from your previous stance, because you clearly stated that you supported the election of a consensual President. What is your comment on this? Is it a kind of deviation, or not?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is on the same line, and it is highlighting different elements. The first step should be indeed finding a consensual personality, or if there are alternatives, several candidates being personally structured in performing that. That would be extremely important and the dream of many, me included. If that is not possible for whatever reason, the Albanian Constitution makes and keeps Albania viable, because the amendments of 2008 require a qualified majority in the three first rounds. Afterwards, if no solution is found – for which I wish and that is why I join those inviting looking for an above party level candidate - in the fourth or the fifth round, a simple majority as it is called here, or an absolute majority as it is called in other countries, is enough and keeps the country viable in having this very important position of the number one of the state not vacant. Therefore it is clear what the Constitution says. But it should also be of interest in making good use of one of the three first rounds, and use the time successfully.”

Journalist: And use the time left because, there is not that much time left.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “In this case, there is enough time, because nothing has to be changed. The voting procedure seems to be clear. It is in the parliament, it is not like general elections with outside campaigning and a large list of candidates. It is about electing one personality in the parliament. It is, on the other hand, surely a matter of fairness also, fairness to the citizens and also to the Members of Parliament, to come out with candidates at a reasonable time before the voting starts.”

Journalist: Do you think this topic could jeopardize the fragile dialogue between the parties, the majority and the opposition, this dialogue and collaboration that exists right now?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “You can not be completely sure, but I am somewhat optimistic. There is always a risk that the dialogue is interrupted, but it is needed for further European integration, and from all camps I heard confirmations that European integration is in the national interest and needs to be pursued. This would be possibly, at least put at risk, if we see no dialogue, or if dialogue is interrupted in the future. Dialogue to find compromise and to develop common solutions is necessary and should be maintained.”

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, do you have any comment to the statement of Prime Minister Sali Berisha, who said that he does not accept advice from international

representatives, when it comes to the election of the President, because this is an Albanian matter, a deeply Albanian matter, and especially he does not accept individual names.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “You said it in your question. It is the Albanian President to be elected, so the proposals should clearly come from the Albanian citizens, or party leaders, or parliamentarians, but clearly from Albanians.

Journalist: So?

Ambassador Wollfarth: I have nothing to add to that. It is the Albanian President, full stop.”

Journalist: Ok. What is your opinion on electronic voting? Both the majority and the opposition have accepted the electronic counting of votes, but it was an OSCE expert, if I am not wrong, who seemed skeptical a couple of days ago, because he assessed that more time is needed to implement this kind of technology. What do you think about this?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “The progress in the Ad Hoc Committee on having that solution drafted is very important, and electronic ballot counting can indeed help especially with speeding up the counting process, bringing democracy even more to life, making it more visible to the citizens, and this is a very good element. You rightfully cite an OSCE/ODIHR expert, who was here during the working group of the Ad Hoc Committee with experts from the OSCE/ODHIR and others. One of the experts pointed out an important fact, that is human trust, and trust in the system. Trust in the voting process is between humans. It can not be delegated to machines, so it has to exist on the human level, and only when it is there on the human level, can it also be supported by machines, while staying with the humans. This is an important fact to know. So trust is what should be worked on, so that it is really to be built up and this is number one. The second point is that when introducing electronic devices, this must be done in a transparent process and accompanied by training, and all that takes time; buying the machines, installing them, doing the training, and explaining what is going to happen. That can not be done in too short time and that was the point that the OSCE/ODHIR expert made, so it can be done.

Journalist: So, it can be done then?

Ambassador Wollfarth: "Yes, it can be done, but not in a last moment exercise. So this is another reason why the decision making on the Electoral Code reform should come soon. Otherwise, time to the next elections is very short and it would put constraints on the sound introduction of that electronic ballot counting. The other thing is, at the entering end, there are also discussions and thinking of card readers. There, it seems a little bit less complicated, but whenever you introduce new elements, it takes time to introduce them. This should be done carefully and in a transparent way, so that people, voters in this case, all together, can trust the system. That can be extremely helpful in making it free and fair, and in the end a successful election leading to full trust in democracy here in Albania.”

Journalist: So you are saying that there is no time for all this kind of technology, since this is a very long process as you explained?

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Ambassador Wollfarth: “I did not say that. There is time. It depends on what is decided upon. The more complex the system that is to be introduced is, the more time is needed. Right now, as I understand it so far when I focus on the ballot counting, the voters would still go to the voting center, get their ballot, cast the ballot and then afterwards that ballot is counted in the machines, with human verifications from both sides. This is how I understand it so far and for that system there seems to be enough time. If it would be a more complex system - there are a large variety of systems in the world market - then probably more time would be needed and then the time is getting scarce, because it is not much more than a year left for introducing such a system. Therefore, good use of the remaining time must be made.”

Journalist: Staying on the electoral reform, a very important part of this process is the verification of the ID cards by the electoral committees and fingerprint checks. Which alternative do you support more and you think that should be approved by the ad hoc committees?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is important that the Albanian members of the ad hoc committee come to a joint agreement on what is best for the process. It makes sense to increase the safety steps in order that only the appropriate people, the ones that have the right to vote, actually cast their votes.”

Journalist: So you do not support any of the alternatives? You think they should just choose the best?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “The ID cards are biometric and electronically readable. Again, there is a price tag to every introduction. The Albanian side must see whether they have that in their budget. Then there is a tendering process, which is also to be followed for the scanning machines. It is a complex process and it must also be operable. There is also the part to be decided whether it is an online or an offline system. Offline is possible, and as I understand, it is less challenging and also less expensive. If one would decide for the online system that would take more introductory time and also need more infrastructure. Nothing is impossible, but it must be funded, and then introduced in a way that it can be trusted. That depends on time and funds available, and also on the good will in making it viable in short time.”

Journalist: I see, so it is a decision that the ad hoc committee should take.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Yes”.

Journalist: Almost all small parties claim that the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, which are the main parties, have violated the equality of the voting in the current regional proportional electoral system. The small parties wanted to change this, while the use of the veto by the Democratic Party seems to have sealed this issue.

Do you share with this concern of the small parties and about the deficiencies in the current electoral system?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “I have a lot of understanding that equal treatment of the vote is being asked. Especially when it comes to being represented with a seat in the parliament, there have been disbalances in the past and it would be good to come to a system where you have, on average, a very similar amount of voters behind every elected seat in parliament, but this something the parties have indeed to discuss together. It must include parties, also because there is a lot to be decided with a qualified majority, including the big parties so it is for the parties to discuss it. Democracy, when you compare to other systems in the world, allows a very wide range of solutions, majority-oriented ones or very, very extremely balanced ones, and you find many examples even within Europe. So, it is a decision on the Albanian side between the parties and then decided in the end in the parliament.”

Journalist: Yes, I understand it is their decision, but do you think this should be discussed more or this is a sealed issue right now?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is a right of all the interested ones to bring that issue up. I do not see it as a sealed issue, but I would recommend to proceed step by step and not blocking other important reforms that are needed to make headway for the European integration of Albania.”

Journalist: You have stated that Albanians are those who should want more this process, the electoral reform also other processes needed for the EU integration of the country. They should want it more than the international community, Albanian. But to be honest, don't you think that in reality is the international community who is pushing Albania, especially the Albanian politics in all this process.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “I like this question. The Albanians definitely have to want it. It is your country, Erjona. I have the feeling when I talk to the citizens that they want it. It is hard to understand what integration really means, but it also means quite important developments. Parts of that we have just talked about and this is having important pieces of legislation in place, but also bringing some of them fully to life. There is also a big working field still opened where every citizen can participate not only as voter but also by showing some civic engagement, being active in civil society and participate to an extend in public life, in helping, through communication, to finding good solutions that make life ever more viable.”

Journalist: All these things you are saying Albanians should do, but it seems like we do not do these things, it seems like we do not care too much or probably, EU integration or the politics is not part of our daily lives. And that is why I ask you that it seems like the international community is always pushing us to do things, is always repeating messages to this and this. Like a parent: you have to do this.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “That is true, but in the case of OSCE Presence we probably are the ones with the most special mandate. That is because we are here on a mandate on invitation of the Albanian government and helping to strengthen the institutions and also helping to build civil society. It is in the mandate that was amended in 2003. So this is something which we are invited to do as OSCE Presence and we are happy

to do that with the team in giving hints, but not doing it ourselves: working with the Albanian counterparts, with authorities or civil society in helping with training, in showing ways what could be done, what could be the next steps to make headway. This is something very special that the OSCE has on offer and the Presence is mandated to do it. It really makes us happy to see that progress. We just recently marked 15 years of work here and seeing the drastic difference, the dramatic progress here in the country from the year 1997 until today is very satisfactory, but this is not the end of the long road. When you look outside, you will see that still much needs to be done. If I could pronounce a personal wish, I would like to see even more progress on fields like education. Much has been done there as well, but this issue is extremely important, because it is a real investment in the people, and therefore in the future.”

Journalist: So we will need your help more in the future. Let's talk a little bit on another topic, which is an important issue and often it goes steered politics and debates between majority and opposition, the 21 January events. The Council of Europe experts who were in Tirana just ended their official visit and asked for the investigation on 21 January to be fully completed. They asked to give to the institutions the necessary independence and freedom to come up with the right results. What is your opinion about this?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Pretty much the same. It needs to be transparent and truthful and the institutions need to do the maximum for correct fact-finding. As it seems, it is not easy, it takes quite some time. Together with others, I would have wished for an even swifter analysis, but transparency and truthfulness is extremely important. This is exactly the same stand as the Council of Europe has in that respect.”

Journalist: Mr. Ambassador, the OSCE Presence assists Albania also in projects regarding good governance, which a very important part is fight against corruption. Unfortunately we must say that the corruption level in Albania is still very high and disturbing according to international reports. It seems that Albanians less and less believe in the state of justice. In your opinion, also as the Head of OSCE Presence, which is the problem? Is it the society, the politics?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “One point might be that the people still think it is part of the culture. I would challenge that. I would invite for – and that is part of how we try to work with some progress – more civic engagement and reporting, when corruption seems to be in place, reported to the authorities or now with the office of the Ombudsman fully in function there are many opportunities and ways to report it and not to do it, not pay that extra fee. When malfunction of the authorities is to be reported a very important institution of the Albanian system, now fully equipped again, should be used. It is very interesting and it also tells a very important story about the concept of the Constitution, which is the fact that in the Constitution, the Ombudsperson and the Ombudsperson's office is described even before the institution of the President. This is a very powerful tool for the people to get their right and clearly corruption is something to be eliminated. While saying this, and coming back to the element of culture, it also happens in other societies so it is nothing special and only existing in Albania, but other societies managed through civic engagement to come to a lower level of corruption. The ideal level, of course, would be zero but also close to zero should be the goal. It needs the help of the citizens.”

Journalist: Which seems a little impossible.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It is hard work, but it is not impossible. Other countries have managed it and I am sure Albania can do. This is one of the things I do admire here, people are very swift in learning and can do, Albanians can do.”

Journalist: But to report a bribe, for example, you have to trust the institutions. That is the problem I think. There is no trust in the institutions. I can denounce, I can report this bribe or this person who is trying to have money from me, but I have to trust the institutions. That is the main point.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “I fully agree. This is a very important point you are making, and that is why I mentioned the office of the Ombudsman. I would invite to trust that office.”

Journalist: You know that Albania was refused for two times the EU candidate status. I know that you have also said in other interviews that this is kind of question more for EU representatives if Albania will get the candidate status this autumn, but don't you think that the success or the failure of electoral reform and also other reforms but especially because this is one of the key priorities asked by the European Commission will be decisive on this vote to get or not EU candidate status?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “As an observer in my current role as OSCE Ambassador but I am also a German diplomat - I have worked in my past on European issues - I would advice to very carefully listen to what the EU has to say, it's the Commission that makes the recommendation, it's the member states that decide. But the EU as a whole pointed always at one very important point: in the end it is the country - and I described earlier what the country is - which decides the speed of the integration. Joining the community some say is joining the club and when you join something you have to stick to the rules, the values and commitments Albania has accepted with the OSCE resemble in many places to those of the EU. So it is every country that decides how quick they fulfil the necessary steps to join a certain entity.”

Journalist: But you think the success or the failure will be decisive getting this autumn the EU candidate status?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “It would be a speculation, but we have seen a huge progress now that the biggest one is that the Parliament seems to be viable again and that is very important for the country.”

Journalist: Our last question. It is about your experience you have in developments in Western Balkans and in international politics, I would like an opinion of yours about the Western Balkans as a region or with all the countries but just as a short resume of mine, Kosovo is still struggling with the violence in the north, still struggling with this, Macedonia still has the name issue with Greece unsolved and right now lately it was confronted with ethnic tensions which again showed its fragile coexistence between Albanians and Macedonians there, Bosnia to tell you the truth twenty years later is still ethnically divided and Albania still after twenty years is struggling to consolidate its fragile democracy. My question is maybe a little tricky.

Has the international community failed in the Balkans, seeing this not that beautiful picture.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “I would wish for even faster progress, but the region has seen tremendous progress. Greece is part of the Western Balkans, it is for decades now member of the European Union, Slovenia has joined, Croatia will join next year, so important steps are being taken. All the other countries seek to get further European integration and make head way, some very slow. It is a long road. The starting points were also very different and the special past of Albania made it especially tricky for Albania to catch up. This catching up is still taking place with tremendous speed. For me and my team, it is very satisfying to work here and trying hard to help, to contribute to that development and I see more than just light at the end of the tunnel. Democracy here is not as fragile as one might think. People are interested: they watch television news, they read newspapers, and an increasing number is also engaged in civil society, so the discussion started, and they want to have real life very similar to the life in other parts of Europe. In that respect I am very confident. But it is a development process and given the low starting point, the headway is tremendous but it is not the end of the story. What democracy needs and one established democracy, so-called old or traditional democracy is that it is defended every day, that it is not being taken as something self-evident, but something that needs to be defended by the spirit of all citizens in wanting it and playing to the rules. And things like corruption, or trafficking, or crimes are clearly not part of that. So it needs to be defended. Voting is a very important part, but it is not only voting every four years or every two years, if you count the local voting, it is also participating in public life through civic engagement. So I see here big progress in Albania, but with more left to be done and, as I told you, it can be done. Albania can do.”

Journalist: And as for Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia you see also a more positive picture than the ugly one that I gave?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Yes. But since I am working here in Albania and we also have OSCE Missions in the neighbouring countries, it is rather for them to comment on the situations there on the ground. Since you mentioned the region again, one should be very clear one element and I can state it from any point of the planet, this is: the international borders stay as they are.”

Journalists: Thank you Mr. Ambassador. I really thank you for being tonight at *Diplomaticus*.

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Thank you.”

Ends