



**REMARKS BY HEAD OF OSCE PRESENCE AMBASSADOR BRUCE BERTON AT
THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE “OUT-OF-COUNTRY VOTING – THE WAY
FORWARD”**

19 October 2023

It is my great pleasure to be here today to mark the opening of this high-level conference, focused on out-of-country voting. We are very happy to support the Central Election Commission in their initiative to have this event, as we fully share the view that this is the right time for all relevant stakeholders to discuss and share their views on this important topic.

The Constitution of Albania recognizes the fundamental right to participate in democratic processes, to elect or to be elected, of anyone who has reached the age of 18. That right is not conditioned by borders or geographic location.

Numbers tell us that around 1/3 or more of Albania's population lives abroad, of whom more than 1.3 million are considered eligible to vote. This is a substantial percentage of the population that contributes to the country's welfare and economic development. The diaspora creates a living bridge between Albania and the rest of the world and they deserve to have their interests represented, to contribute to the political life of their homeland, to hold elected representatives accountable – just as those who live in the country do.

Out-of-country voting is a matter of both principle and practicality. Albania has already addressed the first part of this issue, by regulating in principle the right of its citizens living abroad to vote. In this regard, I avail myself of this opportunity to commend the political actors for finding common ground in 2020 by introducing then, for the first time, key amendments to the Electoral Code recognizing voting from abroad.

What remains a challenge however, is how to ensure the proper and effective exercise of this right in a practical sense, which has proven to be complex. As the Commissioner mentioned, in December 2022, the Constitutional Court imposed an obligation on the Assembly to close the legal gaps that currently exist in the Electoral Code by January 2024. Thus, the time is now to address the specific issues regarding the execution of that political consensus which was achieved in 2020.

There are no standards in the OSCE area, nor within OSCE/ODIHR recommendations, which regulate out-of-country voting. Therefore, it is up to each and every country to apply the model they see as the best fit for them. However, it is crucial that any decisions - be it on legislative gaps or practical arrangements - arise from a wide-reaching consensus, based on a thorough assessment and comprehensive consultations with all relevant stakeholders, from political actors to civil society and the diaspora community.

We see three pillars that must be taken into consideration as implementation is planned: adopting a secure and accessible voting system like the one provided to in-country voters, ensuring broad voter education and outreach programs, and establishing clear procedures for the registration, voting, counting and representation modalities. And as the Commissioner mentioned, these three pillars are the topics of today's discussions.

We at the OSCE Presence stand ready to make our expertise available to all stakeholders, as well as to provide a forum for dialogue among relevant actors and to facilitate the exchange of best practices on different out-of-country voting models, as needed.

I would be remiss if I did not touch upon another point: as we contemplate necessary legislative changes to establish out-of-country voting, we must also be conscious of the fact that OCV needs to be part of a larger package of electoral reform that addresses other issues, including the recommendations of the ODIHR report on the May 14 elections and those outstanding from previous reports as well.

On that note, I welcome the 21 September decision of the Assembly to renew the mandate of the parliamentary ad hoc committee on electoral reform. We look forward to the prompt resumption of the committee's work and the full engagement of parties in achieving tangible results.

I wish all of us success in this journey and am positive that the upcoming reforms, in line with ODIHR standards and recommendation, will be a significant step toward a more inclusive and engaging democracy. Thank you all very much!

Ends