

**Remarks by Head of OSCE Presence in Albania,
Ambassador Bernd Borchardt,
At Conference *The Role of the Internationals in the Transition of Albania*
Tirana, on 6 December 2017**

Dear President Prodi,
Dear President Moisiu,
Excellences,
Ladies and gentlemen

First of all a good morning and welcome to today's conference. We are really honored by your participation and look forward to your contributions.

A few months ago Albanian citizens demonstrated to express their grievances about the decision to destroy their houses to make room for the construction of a new road. Such a demonstration is a civil right which citizens exercise all around the world.

But, this demonstration did not take place in front of the mayor's office or in front of the Prime Minister's Office – it was organized in front of the US Embassy.

This is unusual. It sheds light on the topic of our conference today: "The Role of the Internationals in the Transition of Albania" – a role which seems to be special here in Albania and a role which has hardly been researched by local or foreign academics.

At the same time this conference is also supposed to remind us of 20 years of the OSCE Presence in Albania as a part of the international contribution to Albania's transition: 20 years which have seen a tremendous development. Only twenty years ago Franz Vranitzky and the OSCE Presence came here to support the reconstitution of Albania. Today, we are far beyond the level of those days. Albania has gone a long way, but big challenges remain.

At the same time this place reminds us of tremendously important days of development in the recent history of Albania. It was here that the hunger strike of the students was organized and started. It was from here that the revolt against the Communist regime was initiated. That's why this place is called "Liria" (freedom) hall.

In 2012 a German and a Bulgarian researcher published a paper under the title of our conference. The subtitle was "Bridge over Troubled Waters?" – an allusion to the troubled waters of Albanian politics I guess. The paper concentrated on the effectiveness and the efficiency of the "international factor" as it is called in Albania but also described its role as disproportional. It recommended that international players should not serve as arbitrators in Albanian political rivalries. They should send clear messages that sustainable democracy has to be based on confidence in national referees rather than on reliance upon international arbitration.

Almost 6 years later after the publication of this paper these recommendations seem to remain valid and not transformed into reality.

At the same time plenty of surveys – and, I believe, the electoral results of populists in many parts of Europe - indicate that in large parts of Europe the “confidence” in national referees has decreased. The electorate listens less and less to politicians, media have become what’s called in Germany “Luegenpresse”, the lying press.

Surveys attribute this vanishing trust in institutions to deficits in the communication between the institutions and the voters, and to the perception of dishonesty of the elites. Elites claim improvement, progress on the horizon, but people perceive that this is not the case. They feel that their fears and anxieties are not taken into consideration. Elites are perceived by many people as lacking the will and/or ability for a real, genuine dialogue with the people they represent.

Is Albania just a slightly extreme case of this?

What are the specifics of Albania? As I mentioned there has been very little research. Was the well-known journalist Mustafa Nano right when he wrote just a couple of days ago that the Albanians are either leaving their country or hoping for foreigners, ambassadors to take care of changes here? Or is the intensive diplomatic activity just a result of the 1990s and other phases of the last century when the Balkans created instability? Open questions.

To launch an exploration of this phenomenon, we have today invited several high-profile national and international contemporary witnesses who played a role during specific phases of the transition of Albania. I am personally excited to learn how now they judge “the role of the internationals” – during the “storming of the embassies” in 1990, during the early days of democracy, during the unrest of 1997, or through the Thessaloniki declaration of the EU in 2003, and further on.

At the same time we have invited Albanian and other academics to present their analysis of this role in specific fields of the Albanian transition.

With this conference we pursue a triple aim:

Firstly, we hope to encourage Albanian and other researchers to analyze the role of the internationals here in the country more deeply. Do diplomats here only develop this very visible role by accident, or just because they can? Or are they driven by national actors into this role? Is there a correlation between trust in Albanian elites and the approach of international actors? More research questions could be raised.

Secondly, we would like to provide an input to this debate not only from academics but also from contemporary witnesses as a prime source.

Thirdly, we would like to inspire – based on these inputs - a political debate as well: do Albanians have to demonstrate in front of the US Embassy in order to be heard? Or is the lack of trust in national institutions so deep that improvement is only expected from outside of Albania? Where does the strong role of “the internationals” have its roots in Albania – does it have a long history or is it only because of the “bridge over troubled waters” and the deep rift between the political parties in Albania?

This conference will not give all the answers, but it should make a significant contribution to the debate.

Before finishing I would like to express my gratitude to all supporters of this conference: Tirana University, the New York University in Tirana, the embassies of the United States, Italy and Greece, Friedrich Ebert foundation and the public broadcaster RTSH.

Finally, a special “thank you” goes to my assistant Irida Gjyshi who did the organization of this event and in particular to Marjana Papa and Ilir Kalemaj for the academic advice and support.

I wish you all a very interesting conference.