



Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe
Presence in Albania

HEAD OF PRESENCE'S INTERVIEW WITH *ALBANIAN DAILY NEWS*

Published on 7 February 2013

ADN: It is obvious that Tirana's OSCE Office is fully engaged with the General Elections which will be held in Albania on June 23, 2013. Mr. Ambassador, could you shed some more light on your assistance, the actions to be followed until the entire process is over?

Ambassador Wollfarth: "The OSCE Presence provides assistance to the Albanian authorities on election issues as one of the main areas of its mandate. Thus, last year the Presence offered technical advice and facilitated OSCE/ODIHR expertise to the Assembly throughout the electoral reform cycle. The Presence is following closely all developments, and will continue to do so through the post-election period. We are building on the very good experience and co-operation we had with the Central Election Commission in the past in providing support to increase its professional and technical capacities. We will, for instance, assist the Central Election Commission in training the middle-level election commissioners and support their voter outreach campaign. We will also print and disseminate the newly amended Electoral Code to the relevant actors. I am hopeful that such assistance will enable the Central Election Commission to prepare and conduct elections in line with international standards. In addition, the Presence will assist the OSCE/ODIHR in organizing a successful and efficient OSCE Election Observation Mission, following an invitation extended in late December by the Albanian Government."

ADN: Given the fact that it is evident a harsh atmosphere on the political scene with both majority and opposition trading tough accusations, which is your opinion on this rhetoric which as a matter of fact has been permanent for quite some years, when there are 5 months to go until the voting day? Does such an atmosphere harm a normal electoral campaign, when everybody can remember the situation after the elections of 2009?

Ambassador Wollfarth: "It is neither unusual nor unexpected that we are now entering a very competitive electoral campaign period. It is normal to see a certain degree of political competition, as each party attempts to present its ideas and attract voters. That is democracy. However, political good will and respect for the rule of law and democratic principles are key prerequisites for a successful electoral process. When parties use inflammatory or defamatory rhetoric or make efforts to politicize the work of the election administration, that damages the trust of the public in the entire process. Nevertheless, the preparation and conduct of the elections is not a foregone conclusion. Ultimately, responsibility rests very largely in the hands of the country's political leaders. They have nearly unlimited ability to stage elections that fully meet international standards; likewise, they also have the capacity to fundamentally wreck the process. It is up to them to use the vast powers vested in them in a responsible manner."

ADN: Majority and opposition 'fight' not only in connection with elections; another aspect is the EU integration and precisely three draft laws which are waiting for adoption by parliament. In face of opposition's reluctance to give its support to them, Premier Sali Berisha has called for a referendum. What's your opinion on this new initiative and the problems related to Albania's EU candidate status?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “The three important items, two of them laws and the Assembly’s rules of procedure requiring a three-fifths majority, which are now often indeed referred to as the “three bills” are steps towards the core reforms needed for a democratic country based on the rule of law. The package on parliamentary reform and the new civil service law could form the basis of serious reform to secure a transparent and meritocratic public administration. The amendments to the High Court Law can be seen as an important step in the area of justice reform, including such important aspects like efficiency in countering corruption. As such, these laws are important for Albania on its path to implementing democratic core values, necessarily to be closely linked with rule of law. But I can only re-emphasize the importance of political will to implement genuine reforms, as well as the importance of implementing laws already in place. The current situation should be seen as an opportunity in which Albanian politicians from both sides of the aisle can demonstrate that they do have the political maturity to co-operate.”

ADN: OSCE’s assistance in Albania is not limited only in electoral related issues. Your assistance extends to other fields. Would you be so kind to dwell on this aspect? Which are some of the projects carried by OSCE and the new ones in the future?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “The Presence is mandated to promote democratization, the rule of law, human rights and good governance in Albania, in accordance with OSCE principles, standards and commitments. All these tasks are long-term projects. In consequence of the mandate, our work spans from legislative, judicial and parliamentary reform, to the fight against corruption and anti-trafficking, strengthening independent media, building civil society and police assistance. For example, the Presence supported the establishment of new institutions such as the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination and the Probation Service. We also participate in the on-going reform of the Criminal and Civil Procedure Codes, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice. We have also assisted national bodies such as the High Inspectorate for the Declaration and Audit of Assets in improving their capacities to fight corruption. In addition, we work closely with the Ministry of Defence in the destruction of surplus conventional ammunition and the disposal of dangerous chemicals. I should also like to underline the regional, cross-border perspective present in many of our activities, for instance, in strengthening border management and border security cooperation, through our support for joint exchanges of information and other common activities between the Albanian Border and Migration Police and its peers from neighbouring countries. One stop border crossings like the one in Muriqan are a direct result of our work.”

ADN: A recent nationalistic rhetoric echoing in Albania which climaxed during the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the independence has been met by harsh reactions from its neighbours like Greece, Serbia and Macedonia some of which claimed the scheme of Greater Albania is behind it. Also, some international partners of Albania have called for self – restraint, advising avoidance of nationalistic ‘fever’. Does this mean that Albania has already lost the image of a factor of peace and stability in the region? Which is your message to this Albanian nationalism and why not to something similar evident in other Balkan countries?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Albania has for most of the last two decades played a constructive, stabilizing role in the region. However, the recent rhetoric by some Albanian political leaders is clearly not in line with that tradition. We welcome and encourage responsible political discussion, and urge all sides to avoid any statements or actions that would increase tensions

in the region. The reform agenda goes along with the integration agenda. The hard work needs to be done inside the country. Rather than making inflammatory statements about possible political unification, political leaders need to devote their energy to the reforms necessary for the economic and social development of the country, to allow for further European integration. This is what needs to be done, and this is, in our perception, what the majority of the Albanian people want and deserve.”

ADN: Turning back to the day-to-day life in Albania. The impression is created that an Ambassador’s status means limitation of information on Albania and developments in all fields of life having it from politicians, intellectuals like journalists, writers, artists etc. How do you reach the common people to collect their opinions, concerns, suggestions as they make the absolute majority of the population in this country?

Ambassador Wollfarth: “Fortunately, I must say, that my sources of information are not limited by what could be considered stereotypes. Ever since I arrived in Albania, I have made a consistent effort to interact with all segments of the population – which clearly also includes citizens. I also lead a team, three quarters of which are Albanian citizens. They also help me to better understand citizens’ concerns and the daily sorrows people, families, individuals have in their daily lives, and their challenges. You have most likely observed that I have many meetings and talks, and come into contact with a wide variety of people. I enjoy taking the opportunity to talk to them about their concerns and hopes for the future. I have been impressed with the insights they have shared regarding Albanian society, culture and political life. It is obvious they have certain apprehensions about the future, and rightly expect that the political leadership at all levels, be it national or local, will make serious efforts to work constructively together for the good of the country.”

ADN: Following the line of the above question. How do you feel yourself as Mr. Eugen in ordinary life in Tirana or elsewhere in other regions of Albania? You travel a lot in your free time. I can say that you cannot escape the eye of ordinary Albanians in public places not only because of your diplomatic status but also due to your large stature, which can make you an attraction of people’s eyes.

Ambassador Wollfarth: [smiles] “Albania is clearly more than just its capital. For this reason and very soon after my arrival to the post, I travelled a great deal within Albania, not only in my free time but also in my official capacity as Head of the OSCE Presence. It is facilitated by two facts: the people out there in the country are wonderful people, they deserve more attention, and many parts of Albania are really beautiful. People and nature, including especially the environment, need more national and local attention. Clearly, they have ours. My stature, I am tall indeed, this facilitates attention. But I do not see it as a real burden. On the contrary, I see the positive in it, because it also shows that the profile of the OSCE Presence in Albania is quite high among the citizens, and that, in turn, makes it easier for us to realize our overall goal in the service of the Albanian citizens – promotion of democratization, the rule of law and human rights, as well as to consolidate democratic institutions in conformity with the OSCE, principles, standards and commitments. And, mind you, Albania itself is an active part of this OSCE family of states, helping to provide this support to this great country.”

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