



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

**HEAD OF PRESENCE'S INTERVIEW WITH *ALBANIAN DAILY NEWS*
ON THE OCCASION OF THE PRESENCE'S 20TH ANNIVERSARY**

27 March 2017

Albanian Daily News: A short - term mission which turned 20 years old. How do you consider, Your Excellency, the two decade - OSCE Presence in Albania? Has it been valuable the investment of a mission, which started in the troubled year of 1997 having been renewed to arrive at the current point? Can it be said that the 'mission is accomplished'?

Ambassador Borchardt: Albania has developed impressively over the last 20 years. I personally came here for the first time in 1996 – I very much remember how bad Tirana and other towns looked like. We pride ourselves to have contributed to the positive development of Albania. But substantial problems remain in Albania and the Albanian government has asked the Presence to continue to support Albania in a number of fields such as in the fight against cannabis, to implement the National Strategy on Countering Violent Extremism, to continue engaging youth, women and the marginalized, and giving a regional dimension to this engagement, where possible and also to address the recommendations made by OSCE/ODIHR for the 2017 elections, to help strengthening of the public service media. In more general terms: The Presence has continued to evolve in step with the country, and our work today is focused on the challenges and priorities of today's citizens and institutions. While we concentrated during our first years on the building of institutions we now put emphasis much more on the functionality of institutions and bringing the institutions closer to citizens.

Albanian Daily News: Do you have particular projects to commemorate 20 years of OSCE PiA in Albania?

Ambassador Borchardt: We are preparing two projects during the further course of the year.

One is very much forward looking: a “Youth Trail” organized together with the Municipality of Tirana and Albanian youth organizations. We want to bring young people from all over the Western Balkans to Tirana in late summer to meet here, discuss here about best practises in areas of OSCE involvement like fighting trafficking, corruption and others, but also to do some outdoor activities together.

The other activity is planned for the end of the year. We want to organize a scientific conference to discuss about the role of “Internationals” in the transition of Albania, where we will also reflect on the OSCE PiA's long-term contribution as well. We would launch a call for scientific papers and also invite some prominent contemporary witnesses.

Finally we try to convince our Chairman in Office, Austrian Foreign Minister Kurz, to visit Tirana this year.

Albanian Daily News: A coincidence or not but you have returned to Albania after having served as Germany's Ambassador to Tirana from 2007 to 2010. How do you find the current

position when you represent not a single country but a multi-national organization since your appointment on October 1, 2016?

Ambassador Borchardt: The “job description” is certainly much different. As German Ambassador I had first of all to promote the interests of my country. As Head of the OSCE Presence I have to promote the values the OSCE stands for and to help Albania to achieve its goals in the fields the OSCE is engaged in. Our host country is also a “stake holder” of the Presence, as a participating state of the OSCE. This implies a very close cooperation and coordination with Albanian institutions. We are here for them, not for the OSCE in the first place.

At the same time there is of course a large overlap of the “job descriptions”: the continuation of the reform process in Albania is strongly supported by the OSCE activity and is welcomed by all OSCE participating states, including Germany. And Germany supports our Presence. Another important difference for me is the opportunity to work again in a multinational team with many different nationalities and backgrounds. I enjoyed this already during my first assignment to OSCE and during my work in EULEX.

Albanian Daily News: Some have seen the role of OSCE as a referee on the political scene of Albania with its main actors, left and right-wing forces, in a troublesome hostility, which, no one can deny, has slowed down the progress of democratic reforms in this Balkan country. In your view, which has been the real role of OSCE Presence and its contribution to avoid political confrontations similar to those when OSCE started its mission in Albania?

Ambassador Borchardt: OSCE sees itself today as a partner of Albanian institutions and of the Albanian civil society. Albania is part of the OSCE – so Albania is part of our stakeholders and has ownership of the Presence. Our work is closely coordinated with partner ministries and institutions; a substantial part of the work encompasses the Albanian civil society. But we also see for ourselves an advocacy role: we try to convince our Albanian partners of our recommendations and of the international standards that we represent. But the decisions rest with Albania as a sovereign country and its institutions.

Albanian Daily News: The contribution of OSCE Presence has not been limited only in the field of electoral reform or giving advice on democracy - building in a country which has experienced one of the most ruthless dictatorships in the former communist East European countries. Which are some of the other major projects carried out by this organization during its 20-year mission in Albania?

Ambassador Borchardt: There have been many achievements since the Presence’s arrival: supporting drafting in many fields such as the 1998 Constitution, electoral legislation, anti-corruption strategy, the Law on Protection from Discrimination.

Supporting the establishment of the People’s Advocate, the Probation Service, the online platform njohligjin.al, the Vademecum for lawyers, the disposal of hazardous military chemicals.

Dealing with past, most recently, is a very interesting project: the Presence supports a constructive national dialogue about the former Communist regime in Albania.

Justice without delays: a programme to assist district courts throughout the country to substantially reduce the number of non-productive hearings, all these just to name a few.

Albanian Daily News: Mr. Ambassador, Albania has made progress in certain fields like transport, energy, and other critical urban and rural infrastructure. But this needs to be

balanced as well with investments in people like youth, women, pensioners, vulnerable segments of society. Just to give some facts: poverty reduction has stalled since 2008, youth unemployment rate has been declining but it stands at 30 %, and more than half of Albanian women (aged 15-49) have experienced at least one form of domestic violence in their lifetime, investments in education and health both are at about 3% of GDP, whereas averages for the OECD are more than 6% of GDP. Do you think that more emphasis should be placed on investments in people, in social infrastructure? Which is the role that OSCE Presence can play as an advocate in promoting improvement of people's living conditions?

Ambassador Borchardt: OSCE is part of a co-ordination mechanism among the development partners operating in Albania, together with major multilateral and bilateral donors. We are aware that there is significant financial assistance coming to Albania aimed at addressing the issues you mentioned. Investment in people, building their skills and equipping them with knowledge has been one of the major focus of the OSCE throughout the years, in those areas that are specifically outlined in our Mandate. Nevertheless, it is important to note that OSCE is a regional security organization, and not a donor organization. We invest efforts to tackle security in the country through our very comprehensive concept of security. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, democracy, and the rule of law is at the core of the OSCE comprehensive concept of security. What we also take seriously in our security concept, is that weak citizen-institution relations and low level of trust among citizens towards their institutions represent a factor for insecurity. We are thus committed to bringing the institutions closer to their citizens and building citizens' trust towards their institutions through our multi-faceted approach: by working on anti-corruption measures, supporting judicial reform, improving the court efficiency, promoting human rights, bringing parliament closer to its constituency, etc.

Let us look at two project fields a bit closer:

Our interventions in the field of Anti-corruption:

In its multidimensional intervention, the Presence is developing tools to foster the engagement of business community and civil society in tackling corruption, by supporting the first to monitor anti-bribery measures in business activity, and having consultative meetings with the latter to discuss corruption complaints reporting mechanisms and capacity building training programs to monitor the anti-corruption action plan. The Presence is now finalizing an Anti-Bribery Code of Conduct aiming at providing the business community in Albania with useful instruments in the fight against corruption.

Additionally, the OSCE Presence in Albania, in coordination with National Coordinator against Corruption, is currently supporting the activity of the Operational Room running the stopkorrupsionit.al portal, which is an innovative instrument allowing citizens to anonymously report corruption to the responsible authorities. We believe support to this medium of reporting is essential to increasing public trust in the existing anti-corruption mechanisms currently available in Albania, as well as in the institutions involved in the fight against corruption.

In the field of local governance:

A particular focus in 2017 will be given to the provision of assistance to local governments units to better understand the motivation factors for the cannabis cultivation phenomenon, providing practical recommendations as well as alternative and potential development models and contributing by behavioural change campaigns by engaging the community liaisons. In continuation of the support given in assessing the property transfer process from central to

local government, during 2017 the Presence will address the identified gaps by offering capacity building to municipal officials in charge of the property transfer process, to undertake the necessary steps to complete the process.

Albanian Daily News: OSCE along with ODIHR have been engaged for many years with the electoral reform in Albania. After each elections be them general or local there has been problems, and neither of them has been considered fully democratic. The question which is made now when Albania is expected to hold general elections on June 18 this year is has the electoral system and its structures improved to guarantee free and fair elections? Why has a new element become an issue for the opposition but also for other political forces - the electronic voting? In short, are you worried that opposition might boycott the June elections?

Ambassador Borchardt: You are raising several issues.

In general I can say that Albania's electoral system is a legitimate system, which should be respected. Both left and right wing major parties agreed to the current system in 2008, as they deemed it best fitted the Albanian reality. Therefore, any decision to preserve or revise it rests solely with the Albanian political class. It can be changed – if there is a majority in favour of the changes – in due time before the next elections.

Regarding the electoral legal framework, OSCE/ODIHR has noted in its 2013 and 2015 reports on Albanian elections that, despite shortcomings, it generally provides a sound basis for democratic elections to be conducted. However, this legislation should be improved to address the numerous recommendations that have been made by the OSCE/ODIHR and other international and domestic actors.

Elections in Albania have constantly suffered mostly because of inadequate implementation and enforcement by all main stakeholders. The lack of political will to implement elections effectively by the political parties and the politicization of institutions involved in the conduct of elections continue to undermine the electoral processes.

Electronic voting is a possible, but technologically rather complicated electoral system. Its introduction has been demanded before the 2013 elections by the opposition, the demand has been raised again in 2016 by the new opposition. Both times we had to argue that the introduction of such a system takes a lot of time which was both times not available anymore when the request was raised. On 19 June the discussion can be reopened for the 2019 elections, we are ready to support Albania with know-how about electronic voting systems.

You also raise the issue of a possible election boycott: I strongly believe that Albanians deserve free and fair elections, on time and with all relevant parties represented. OSCE/ODIHR are preparing a very robust election observation mission. If parties want elections to be based on a better electoral law – then they should find a consensus on improvements. We are urging them for more than a year to do that. We have made many recommendations for improvements. Dialogue about improvements to the Electoral Code must be the way forward and not threats with an election boycott, a boycott would only harm the country and its initiators. Threats to interrupt the regular democratic process would be highly irresponsible, very few Albanians can want the country to move 20 years back. Calls for violence are an absolute no-go area.

Albanian Daily News: Mr. Ambassador, when you were German Ambassador there was a hot spot of cannabis cultivation in Lazarat, southern Albania. Since three years it is spoken of 'cannabization' of the entire Albania. Not only a local problem, it has become an international concern. Which is the role of OSCE Presence in overcoming this plague closely linked with organized crime and corruption at the highest levels of politics?

Ambassador Borchardt: Cannabis production was already an international concern when I was here as German Ambassador. There has been a lot of international reporting about cannabis in Albania between 2007 and 2010 when I served here. A production of 1,000 tonnes with a street value of 2,000 million Euro as estimated in 2013 showed that Lazarat was not a “folkloristic” or local problem but the hub of a criminal industry. Regrettably Albanian politics did not act much on this until 2013. Low levels of seizures and destruction document that. What has changed today is that politics and society discuss about it and since 2014 the police are fighting it much more intensively. This is a positive development. The Lazarat plantations were destroyed in 2014. Last year 2.5 million cannabis plants were destroyed by the police. This is a success – these plants would have produced huge amounts of marihuana. But continuing seizures of marihuana and hashish indicate that the problem is not solved. The government has developed an action plan to fight cannabis, the OSCE Presence was invited to contribute to this plan and did so. We encourage the government to implement this Action Plan with vigour. We stand ready to continue our support – in particular in the field of criminal investigations. We will also closely monitor the implementation of the Action Plan.

Albanian Daily News: Your Excellency, which is your opinion on the role civil society in Albania a country where for the sake of truth there are more 1,500 NGOs of different kinds? Do they play the role they are supposed to play or most of them serve as means of enrichment for some people or worse than that as money- laundering tools because the perception of majority of ordinary people on them is as if they are non- existent?

Ambassador Borchardt: When discussing civil society, we should be aware that the core of the discussion is about democracy. Democracy is real as much as people are active and participate in democratically-made decisions. The number of NGOs per se is not an indicator of active citizenry. You can have 1,500 or 3,000 NGOs, but that is not necessarily what it takes to have a strong civil society. Of course, the number of active NGOs of different kinds is a good omen for a democracy. But it is not all what you need for a vibrant democracy.

What shows real civil society is engagement – in local communities, on the streets, across communities, across all social denominations. Real civil society means real involvement in causes of actual public interest; it means real inclusion, and at times real confrontation with the authorities on issues of perceived and actual injustice or bad practises. We should move away from the widespread confusion of identifying civil society only with NGOs. Whilst NGOs are of course the most visible part of civil society, they are, as they should be, the tip of the iceberg. There is more to civil society than formal organizations. There is more to civil society than donor-funded projects, as important and well-implemented as they might be. The real impact of civil society is seen when many people join forces around common causes.

There is tangible proof – also in recent years - that civil society can make a difference in Albania. Civil society activists have made strong efforts to make their side of the story heard in protecting public interest in several occasions – the efforts of the Alliance against the Import of Waste in Albania, the activities for the protection of the Valbona river valley and

other important sites of natural and historical value, or the movement against the dismantlement of the Syrian chemical weapons in Albania just to mention a few. It is very easy to point the finger at civil society and accuse it of being misused by politicians. But in truth all civil society is political. Civil society is a political space – it's the arena where the citizens seek to shape the rules governing aspects of social life.

The Presence wants to provide relevant, neutral and effective support to civil society, active citizenship and citizen participation. Our endeavours go towards supporting citizen engagement, democratic education and civic activism among youth, with a special focus on rural areas, as much as towards supporting international and national donor coordination in the field of civil society development here in the capital of Albania. Albanian citizens, in particular young people from smaller towns and villages often find themselves cut out from the civil society life that remains heavily concentrated in the capital. There is sufficient evidence pointing to the fact that, civil society remains fragmented overall and overly dependent on donor funding. On the other hand, there is positive news. Albania has made steps forward in creating its own mechanisms to support civil society development – the establishment of a state-funded Agency for Support for Civil Society is the embodiment of that mechanism. We have supported, monitored, advised and coordinated our efforts with that institution, in concert with our international partners.

An important aspect of our work with civil society is to bring Albanian youth closer to the democratic institutions; we try to get them interested to ask questions, to challenge decision-makers, to debate with them. At times we organize open forums in remote areas, by bringing decision-makers to the young people. In the debate with our former Chairperson-in-Office Didier Burkhalter, one Albanian youngster asked the question: What is democracy? Foreign Minister Burkhalter replied: "Democracy is, above all, respect for everybody. It is an opportunity for everyone to participate in the search for a solution. Democracy also means inclusiveness and responsibility".

I couldn't have phrased it better. Our work is precisely this - to give as much opportunity for citizens to participate, to educate for democracy, to support inclusiveness and shared responsibility. The solution to any crisis of democracy or and the remedy to any democratic deficiency lies with the Albanian citizens. Citizens are the best guardians to democracy.