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Political and Press Affairs Unit

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Interview with Ambassador Peter Burkhard, the Head of the OSCE Mission to Serbia

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Reforms for their own sake, not for the sake of EU

The Head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to Serbia, Ambassador Peter Burkhard, in an interview with Fonet, stated that Serbia is implementing the reforms needed for accession into the European Union (EU) not for the sake of the EU but because these reforms are beneficial and needed for Serbia's future.

"You are conducting reforms for your own sake, not for the sake of the EU", said Burkhard, who believes that the fight against corruption is the key element, not only for economic success, but also for the state of democracy.

He welcomed the commitment of the Government of Serbia in this area and explained that the fight against corruption was very important, comprehensive and a time-consuming task, which must include the whole society. It's not just about the arrest of some people, but about the combination of further actions that should be taken, and institutions which should be established. The key is that these institutions should function properly, Burkhard pointed out.

He assessed that the adoption of the Law on Public Procurement, as well as the laws about prevention of financial misdealings and money laundering, is important.

As for the punishment measures, prosecutors and judiciary play an important role. It is a comprehensive set of institutions, mechanisms and a process, stated Burkhard, adding that the political will for their establishment and functioning exists.

Stating that the judiciary is a key element of the rule of law, Burkhard pointed out that a functioning judiciary is important, not only for the protection of human rights, but also for economic development, since "investors will not invest in countries where the judiciary is not functioning."

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In all this, the trust is crucial. Citizens need to trust in the judiciary. Based on the results of public opinion polls, we have an impression that this kind of trust in Serbia, to put it mildly, is not highly developed, said Burkhard.

In Serbia, cases are often pending before court for years until verdicts are reached, said Burkhard, which obviously creates distrust and suggests that the system, more or less, is not functioning. However, he welcomed that the new government expressed its commitment to overcome shortcomings in the judicial system.

There are too many judges in some places, while elsewhere there are not enough of them, so it is a problem of management, among other things. There is a backlog of the past with the judicial reform, which, at this stage, looks pretty chaotic, Burkhard added.

It's not a question of blaming somebody for this, but how to resolve the situation, Burkhard explained, adding that the OSCE supports clear criteria for the appointment and dismissal of judges. The OSCE Mission cooperates with the Ministry of Justice and with all other stakeholders, Burkhard said.

One of his first impressions since he arrived in Belgrade two months ago, was a "very diverse ethnical composition" of Serbia. "Even in Belgrade, there is no monolith ethnic landscape. This ideally, in the long run, should be one of the advantages of Serbia", said Burkhard. According to him, ethnically diverse societies, who respect diverse values, are usually more vibrant and more successful, especially in the global context.

Mutual understanding and a sense of cultural diversity is very helpful. In today's globalized world, one cannot be successful without it, said Burkhard.

Adding that "inclusion of minorities is not easy" and that "sometimes there are difficulties and problems", Burkhard said that in south Serbia the dialogue should be established between the local Albanian population and the relevant government representatives from Belgrade.

Speaking about the important role of Belgrade in the region, Burkhard pointed out that Serbia will chair the OSCE in 2015, which is yet another reason that Serbia should and can be a good example of neighbourly relations.

"Since I arrived in December, I have seen a number of positive steps of Serbian President Tomislav Nikolic and ministers outreaching to their neighbours, as well as the representatives of neighbouring countries during their visits to Belgrade," Burkhard said.

He described the dialogue of Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dacic and Kosovo Prime Minister Hashim Thaci, as well as the meeting between Nikolic and President of Kosovo Atifete Jahjaga, as extremely positive development. (End)