

**INTERVIEW OF HEAD OF PRESENCE, AMBASSADOR EUGEN WOLLFARTH,
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By Genc Mlloja

Mr. Ambassador, this Sunday Albania will see local government elections taking place. Do you have any final messages for the political parties and the voters as we get closer to Election Day?

Yes, very simply, it is the day of the voters to decide and political parties need to be aware of the very heavy responsibility that lies on their shoulders. They will need to ensure that these elections are an outstanding success. That's it. They simply have to work. They need to meet international standards. Let us not forget that Sunday is for citizens to make an informed choice. Political parties have a duty to ensure that all voters are able to cast their vote in calmness and serenity and that their votes will be counted. When the results have been counted, all political parties need to accept the results and to move on forward in the public interest. I expect all political parties to work together within the framework of the Electoral Code. It is a Code both main political parties co-authored so there should be no difficulties in both sides steering the electoral ship *Albania* towards more calm and still waters. Indeed, the rule of law needs to be followed - this is the only way. Given Albania's integration ambitions, this country cannot afford a repeat of what happened after the 2009 elections. There is no further time to lose.

Do you see the CEC playing a pivotal role in ensuring that we see a successful process? What will be your position if the SP withdraws its commissioners from the process?

The CEC has a key role to play in working together in a spirit of political goodwill. In doing so, they will be able to help in a major way to ensuring that the right atmosphere is achieved on Election Day. The CEC need to put the public interest ahead of any political pressures. Let me be absolutely clear that there can be no blocking of the process or any walking out by either side. Commissioners need to stay at their posts and serve the public. Here, I think it is important to clearly state that there is only one legal voter list. Any attempts by whomever to introduce some sort of second, 'privatised' voter list is something that is absolutely illegal and should be unconditionally condemned by all political parties who respect the rule of law. All such cases should be dealt with accordingly by the justice system.

During the last few weeks you have been vocal in your support towards the State Police in relation to these elections. How confident are you that they will perform in a way that helps build confidence in the process?

The state police have received a great deal of technical electoral assistance from the Presence in recent weeks. I am fully confident that this support will be used in a proper way. We will also be helping in some parts of communication process through providing satellite telephones for service in the more remote areas of the country. I expect the State police to play the same impartial and professional role they have played in the past two sets of elections. The public will be looking to them to assist in maintaining a calm electoral environment in which elections can take place. The senior leadership of the police know that they will be under constant public scrutiny. I believe that we will see them respond in a proportionate and sensitive manner, whenever necessary. The State police are well prepared and are well aware of having the need of free elections, free access, supporting the citizens. However, they cannot do miracles. In real life, all citizens, and political parties also have a responsibility to support the police. When we have this mutual respect then we will see a calm and peaceful process in which elections can successfully take place.

Is there anything you would like to say to the voters before they cast their ballots on Election Day?

Please keep in mind that these elections are for you the people and nobody else. These elections are for you to decide who you want to represent you. You get the opportunity to make a choice on who you wish to see deliver local public services to you and your families. It is about practical life. It is not about *cloudy dreams*. These elections should be a time where local people standing as local candidates have their chance to say how they would make their locality a better place in which to live. These elections will now also be based on better voter list after a new civil registry and address system was built by the Ministry of Interior following a multi million Euros EU funded project implemented by the Presence. This should give real confidence to all citizens that their votes will matter, that their votes will be properly counted, and that the post-election appeals process will be transparent and based on the rule of law. I am confident that the votes of citizens will result in freely and fairly elected local governments, which will then work hard for the people over the next four years irrespective of political colour. With Albania's European integration aspirations in mind, now is the right time for all citizens to take proper ownership of the process so that we see elections that the people really deserve. Albania has made a lot of progress in the last 20 years and there is no obstacle for a good future if the citizens contribute now.

After local government elections have been held, you have publicly mentioned many times that an electoral reform needs to take place. Why is this so necessary?

Voters and parties deserve knowing the rules in good time. After every time Albania holds public elections, there are invariably bold political promises of electoral reform. Then, after stagnation and neglect, last minute political fixes try to make the procedures better. To really improve the process, this time things will need to be different. Parties should start right away to prepare for serious conversations later this summer. And then after the summer break we will expect the political parties – and here I stress all political parties - to start work together on a new reform. The long and drawn out story of failed elections in Albania has to end. The Presence stands ready to support Albania in getting its act together so that we have a glorious upbeat ending rather than the usual and unnecessary tragedy we have witnessed until now.

In recent weeks, you along with some other Ambassadors have been fairly public in your comments about these elections. Do you think it's fair to say that you are collectively the judges or referees in this electoral process?

I do not accept such a view. I believe the Albanian Constitution and Electoral Code make it very clear where ownership of the election process begins and ends – the Albanian state institutions and through them the Albanian people. At the end of the day, we are here as friends to this country to offer encouragement and to help the country's long term development. My US and EU colleagues, just like myself, are convinced supporters for democracy and the rule of law in this country. However, our role can only ever be just this – 'to encourage' and 'to help'. Ultimately, it is the Albanian people and the Albanian political system that they elect, who have to want these elections to succeed more than we do. Albania's future in Europe is at stake here. The success of these elections will help accelerate the integration process. The stakes are that high. What is important is to have the strong political will of key actors like political parties, the candidates, the CEC, the citizens, the media and the police. If this happens, then Albania's future seems extremely bright.