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MAWSON: My name is Amy Mawson and I'm here interviewing Petrit Gjokuta. I'm not sure if I have the pronunciation perfect. The date is the 4th of June, 2010 and I'm here at the Central Election Commission (CEC). Thanks very much for agreeing to this interview.

GJOKUTA: *You're welcome.*

MAWSON: Maybe I could just start off by understanding when you joined the Election Commission and what position you hold now.

GJOKUTA: *I started working in the Central Election Commission in January 2002. At the time I was Director of the National Registry of Voters. I held this position until 2005 when the law changed and from that time it is not the responsibility of the Central Election Commission. Starting from 2005 I have been holding the position of Director of the Information Technology Directory.*

MAWSON: Great. So maybe I would like to hear from you, when you joined the Election Commission in 2002, what was it like the first few days on the job?

GJOKUTA: *There was a time when it was uncomfortable to work because we had just come out of the 2001 elections, the election was highly contested—the results of the election were highly contested regarding the list of voters. That is why it was particularly difficult to work, especially in this process in the compiling and keeping records of the list of voters. So this was the initial feeling, the situation was a little charged, but once I started the job and I checked out the regulation, I felt optimistic about the job, about the fact that the process was clearly explained.*

MAWSON: So how did you go about—considering the problems that there had been with the voters' list, how did you go about thinking how you would reform?

GJOKUTA: *Since one of the priorities of the Central Election Commission was the improvement of the list of voters, I had great support from the institution, from the previous Chair of the institution and also the members. We built the work in such a way so that we could also have support from the government which basically had a lot of influence and a lot of responsibilities regarding this problem, the list of voters.*

So starting from concrete infrastructure problems as well as the legal problems. We also focused on working and the help that we would get from political parties. Especially from those parties that complained about the quality of the list of voters. Actually we had greater cooperation with those parties. By basically asking their opinion about every action we undertook.

MAWSON: Can I just interrupt to ask, earlier on you mentioned that fixing the voters' list was one of the priorities of the Central Election Commission. Who was setting those priorities in the Election Commission?

GJOKUTA: *The priorities were set by the Central Election Commission based on the opinions of the political parties as subjects in the elections. Also it was based on the reports of the international observers, especially on the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) observers.*

MAWSON: So you took these different priorities, the political parties are telling you some things and the international observers are telling you some things. But then who brings together those two different areas and makes a single list of priorities that says "we'll do this and then this", which individuals were involved?

GJOKUTA: *Of course the initial presentation of the problem was from the respective directory but then of course it was also presented to the administrative board. After this everything was decided in the Commission meetings or board. There were also present representatives of the political parties. Every decision that was taken was based on the law, the existing law. The action was taken from the respective directory by consulting with the Chair of the institution, but no action was undertaken without approval from the Central Commission.*

MAWSON: So can I ask, what are the directories in the Central Election Commission?

GJOKUTA: *Other than the Directory of Information Technology, back in the day we used to be the Directory of the National Voters Registrar. Also there is the Directory of the Electoral Commissions that deals with the lower level commissions.*

MAWSON: Both the local and the zone?

GJOKUTA: *Yes, from local to the polling stations. They are the Logistics Directory, Finance Directory, the Human Resources Directory and the PR Directory. Within these directories there are different sectors such as the training sector of the commissioners. Also the sector of educating voters—voter education—or the PR sector. This is generally the structure. It used to be like this and it is like that today. The only difference being that we do not have responsibility of the list of voters any more.*

MAWSON: That's really helpful, thank you very much. So with these different directories, each of these has a sort of director, like you were the director of the—now you're the Director of the Technology Information. Each one has a director. Then you have a meeting with the Central Election Commission Board you said?

GJOKUTA: Yes.

MAWSON: The Central Election Commission Board, is that just the members of the Election Commission?

GJOKUTA: *The members of the Central Election Commission, and the political parties' representatives who have the right of debating, the right of speaking but not of voting.*

MAWSON: So does each party have one representative or they have more than one?

GJOKUTA: *Only one representative.*

MAWSON: Earlier on you were talking about how you set the priorities. You said that you had great support from the institution; what was that support like? What did it look like? Was it just moral support or was it providing staff to help you work on the issues?

GJOKUTA: *The support consisted of several—on one hand it was moral because we were given the right to discuss with them in the presence of the political parties' representatives but also in the presence of government representatives. Afterward there was also financial support which was also paired with human resources. There was also financial support which was guaranteed by some international donors. It was the foundation—IFES (International Foundation for Electoral Systems); it was Dickson Bailey, if you know.*

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- MAWSON: Yes.
- GJOKUTA: *He was the Director for Albania. There the pilot project underwent regarding the list of voters. This was amongst other things. There were several recommendations that were forwarded to the government for improvements in this system. Unfortunately most of these changes were delayed. For instance we proposed the digitalization, the creation of a database, a digital database in the local government, where the lists come from. We were able to implement this project through the pilot project in the municipalities that were involved in the pilot project. But the government did not commit itself to do it on a large-scale; but now as we're speaking this has been achieved. The last elections were done.*
- MAWSON: Could I just interrupt? How many municipalities or how many areas was the pilot project working?
- GJOKUTA: *There were three units and they also overlapped with the electoral zones such as the municipality of Kavajë. There was another larger unit which included a lot of different, more than one electoral areas, zones, and there was the municipality of Durrës. Also work started at the municipality of Tirana, the biggest in Albania, and had eleven other municipality units. It is an administrative term we use.*
- MAWSON: But that's not a zone?
- GJOKUTA: *So we have two different kinds of electoral zones; one is for local elections and the other for Parliament elections ("political elections"). For the local elections one municipality is one electoral zone. For political elections, this depends on the size of the municipality. It might be part of an electoral zone or include several electoral zones within.*
- MAWSON: I understand. So earlier on you were mentioning when you were putting together this reform, the pilot project, that you had some—you were doing it in such a way that you could get the support from the government.
- Could you tell me a bit more about what you mean by that?
- GJOKUTA: *It consisted in the changes that were to be made about the law for civic records. Also eventually to take measures that these legal formulations were basically carried out in the municipalities. The representatives of the government, back in the day, they stated that they could—that these changes could not be done before the elections of the day. We're talking about the local elections of 2003.*
- MAWSON: Sorry, the government said they wouldn't be able to do it—.
- GJOKUTA: *Before the elections. However, they changed the law. They were unable to digitalize the database and to build a national register of voters automatically. So in the elections of 2003 we had to do a kind of reform; however, we couldn't do it totally automatically.*
- MAWSON: Sorry, I just don't fully understand. In the run up to the 2003 elections you were hoping that you would be able to digitize all the records, all over the country?
- GJOKUTA: Yes.
- MAWSON: But then it couldn't happen. Why did the government not want it to happen?

GJOKUTA: *Of course they did not say that they were not willing to commit to this, but they were saying that there was not enough time and financial means to carry this out. So the government at that time promised that they were going to be able to set the system for the elections of 2005 but not of 2003. Practically it could not be achieved for the elections of 2005, not even 2007, but it was achieved in 2009, but at least it was done.*

MAWSON: And that was all to do with money or also with political will?

GJOKUTA: *My personal opinion is that it had to do with political will. This is, I do not distinguish between the government change. So there was also talk that it was also because the political parties did not really understand how this worked but I personally do not believe that.*

MAWSON: Could I just get more of an idea of the timeframes that we're talking about. When exactly did you join the Election Commission in 2002, what month?

GJOKUTA: *On the 16th of January 2002.*

MAWSON: So you come in in January 2002 and then when does this idea for the pilot project start to emerge and whose idea is it?

GJOKUTA: *The first directives were given to me by Mr. (Ilirjan) Celibashi and the directives for the strategy to be followed. And we started building it very quickly, also with support by IFES.*

MAWSON: So where did Celibashi get this idea, or was it not his idea, was it somebody else's?

GJOKUTA: *I don't really know, how did he get it. There was a lot of support from the international bodies that were present and I also know it was a great concern of his during those times. From what he has told me, before I joined the commission, Mr. Celibashi was in a study trip in the United States and also Canada with some other colleagues of his. One of the major topics, trained topics, was also the voters' list. The problems were, as much as they were technical—had a technical nature—let's say they had a conceptual nature as well. In the literature we consulted they were clearly stated and explained. There were a lot of infringements and problems practically in implementing this. Even the Central Election Commission could not overcome these difficulties because they did not have the necessary capacities.*

MAWSON: You mean for implementing the pilot project or for fixing the entire system?

GJOKUTA: *We're talking about the whole system. Even legally the task of the Central Election Commission was not to deal with the records in the respective municipalities throughout the country. It was supposed to get them ready from the municipalities, automatically from the local government.*

MAWSON: So was that the idea behind the pilot project, to try to see whether you could work with the local level government to try and get the records up to scratch?

GJOKUTA: *So one thing was to get them automatically, the other goal was to have clear lists without duplicates, without having any problems. According to the law during that time—because one of the problems, technical problems was the fact that a citizen—they had a right to register in the list of voters, but the problem was that they could register in one place but also in other places where they had property*

or a house. Now for instance it was very easy to compile the list of voters because the existing law, the present law, clearly defines that the citizen has to register only in one place where his permanent address is. During that time there was a huge inside migration. There was a movement from rural to urban areas, from less developed areas from the north to the center, from the south to the center. Basically they would register twice, in the place of their origin and also in the place where they were now.

So one of the major goals and challenges was to figure out and have the citizens register only once on the list, not twice.

MAWSON: Why had there been so much internal migration at that time?

GJOKUTA: *Because following the changes, the democratic changes in Albania and the fall of communism, movement was free, basically, in Albania. During communism you only could move from one place to another with permission from the government.*

MAWSON: So the idea was that if you digitize the records at the local level then you could overcome these duplication problems?

GJOKUTA: *Exactly.*

MAWSON: So just to go over the timeline again. You joined in January 16th, 2002 you said. Then you get this information from Celibashi that this is what you need to do, we need to really focus on this as a priority. Then this pilot project is also suggested by Celibashi, is that right?

GJOKUTA: Yes.

MAWSON: So then what happens, he presents this idea right when you arrive, or after you've been there?

GJOKUTA: *It seemed that the idea for the pilot project had been matured before I joined. But the steps that had to be undertaken and the discussions about the steps that had to be undertaken were being done at the time I joined the office.*

So the things actually, the problems we faced were ordinary. We were supposed to manage the whole national register but we didn't have computers, we didn't have the respective software. It started from this, from these problems to the more conceptual problems like building a conceptual framework on how we were going to build a whole system and change a whole system.

I remember during that time that we came up with ideas, all the changes we were going to make. We forwarded this to the political parties and they had their own discussions, their own points they raised. Then they would send them back. So we sort of created this process. As far as I remember the pilot project was approved by the Central Election Commission in May 2002.

MAWSON: So it actually went quite quickly after you joined. You joined January and then by May—that's what, four months?

GJOKUTA: *We had to work quickly because the elections were coming up in October 2003, the local elections. There were deadlines, the deadlines were set in the law. We had to work, we had to start compiling the list of voters in February 2003 so the list would be ready for the elections. It was a very dynamic period.*

MAWSON: So can I ask, you had to get the approval of different ministries or different parts of the government in order to run this pilot project or was it just the Central Election Commission could just decide on its own—and government ministries?

GJOKUTA: *It was necessary for the Central Election Commission to have the approval of the respective political parties if we wanted to do an efficient job; at the same time, also have the support of the government. The minister of the local government, whose responsibility was to cover the municipalities, hence with the register—the civil registry, he was continuously invited in the debates and the meetings we had with the representatives of the political parties. Mr. Celibashi also had several meetings with the prime minister at that time. This is in addition to the official communications we had with the government. So there were other factors involved in the process.*

MAWSON: So while you're doing all of this with the pilot projects, it finally gets approved in May, what are your colleagues in other parts of the organization doing at that time?

GJOKUTA: *I don't remember very clearly. They had their own responsibilities. For instance we had very close cooperation with the Directory of the Commissions. So they supported us through the commissions they had at the base, the local level. The Director of Finances would help us with their own means, this is, of course, I'm talking about the support we had for the pilot project, but of course they also had their own responsibilities like the logistics they had to deal with, logistical problems.*

MAWSON: I should probably ask those directors about their different areas.

GJOKUTA: *Maybe they remember better.*

MAWSON: I wanted to ask you just a point of clarification. You talk about the directory of the commissions, the local level commissions. Just correct me if I'm wrong because it was my understanding that the local level commissions get appointed by the political parties at each election?

GJOKUTA: *It used to be like this. They were nominated, it used to be like this and it still is like that.*

MAWSON: So do they work in between elections or they only work at election time?

GJOKUTA: *Regarding the year we're talking about, they had a longer period of work than now, now it's very short. During that time there was a proposal to create an organization of commissioners, a national organization of commissioners. Because according to the law at that time the local commissions at the second level also had responsibility for the compilation of the list of voters. Now neither the local commissions, nor the Central Election Commission deal with the list of voters.*

MAWSON: Anymore.

GJOKUTA: *Anymore. This is why I mentioned before that we cooperate a lot with the directory of the commissions. So they organized the commissioners in different districts to help us.*

MAWSON: With the pilot project?

GJOKUTA: *No, that was the normal—. There was another project that was financed by IFES, whose focus was to create the organization of the commissioners. The goal, the ultimate goal was for them also to—one of their goals was also to influence the list of voters. Unfortunately they could not achieve the organization of the commissioners; the national organization of commissioners was never created and is still inexistent. Unfortunately this was due to lack of will, political will.*

MAWSON: So who was pushing this idea of having a national organization of commissioners? Do you know whose idea that was?

GJOKUTA: *This was a major goal and concern of the head of the institution at the time because a survey had been carried out regarding the commissioners as well as the judges that dealt with the complaints, the electoral complaints. During that time the judges, they said they had to do more—they dealt more with the elections than they do now. According to the survey the second level commissioners as well as the judges were to be continuously updated regarding electoral issues. Their training had to be continuous.*

MAWSON: Can I just interrupt because I think I got a bit lost somewhere. The judges used to do more with elections than they do now, what does that mean?

GJOKUTA: *Because now there is only one court that deals with the elections. It is called the Electoral College. They deal only with the complaints, complaints regarding the decisions made by the Central Election Commission. During that time the lower level courts also dealt with the issues such as the counting of votes, if there were ever recounts. A larger number of courts and judges were involved but now the recount process is not any more specified in the law. It has been substituted by the process of invalidity—.*

MAWSON: Invalidating?

GJOKUTA: *Invalidating the vote, yes. This leads to a re-voting process.*

MAWSON: Can you just explain a little bit more about that because I don't think I fully understand, sorry.

GJOKUTA: *Surely these are issues, they're not in my specific focus. But I'm going to say things that are within my general knowledge. So we're talking about the courts. Would you like some information also about the commissions?*

MAWSON: This is just about this issue of now the recounting is specified—not specified in the law as it was before?

GJOKUTA: *The previous law specified that if the difference between the candidate that was in the first place and the candidate that was in the second place was smaller than the number of votes that were considered as invalid, they had to do a recount in that specific voting center. The recounting of the votes was not only carried out by the commissioners but also a judge had to be present. This is how the judges were involved. This has been taken out from the law, the law does not say this any more.*

MAWSON: So now who gets to decide if a recount is done?

GJOKUTA: *Now there is no recounting because the counting of the votes is concentrated in one place. But there are some cases where the law predicts that the elections can be considered invalid in a specific area. One of these issues for instance is*

the difference between the first and the second candidate. But if the Central Election Commission decides that the result of the recounting of the votes will change the overall result of the elections, in that specific area a revoting process happens.

MAWSON: Thank you very much, that is really helpful. Can we go back to the pilot project which is what we were talking about before we got into the—?

GJOKUTA: *Yes, there was a digression.*

MAWSON: This is very useful. But the pilot project was approved in May 2002. Then how did you start to put the pilot project together? What steps were involved to actually implement it?

GJOKUTA: *The implementation started right away in the municipality of Kavaja in June. This started in June and ended somewhere in October or November 2002. At the end of this project a report was presented in the Central Election Commission with the presence of the political parties. The conclusions drawn from the meeting and the first stage of the project were taken and the pilot project was implemented in other bigger municipalities. The results taken, drawn from the implementation in these bigger municipalities, were discussed again. The last results were taken to consideration to map out the larger scale, the national scale change in reform.*

MAWSON: So it was like a three-stage. You did one first stage and then a second stage. The second stage started when? Like October, November 2002?

GJOKUTA: *Yes. It started after the first stage. The project, the pilot project was over before February 2003.*

MAWSON: That was the deadline. So after the pilot project then there was not enough political will and it didn't get implemented on a wider scale?

GJOKUTA: *So it was stated by the government that the national scale project could not be carried out. This statement from the government was made in autumn 2002 and in October 2002 they approved the new law for the civic records. They declared that "we pass the law, we approve the law, but the changes cannot be made for the 2003 elections". However the pilot project was constructed, was mapped out in such a way. However, according to the pilot project it was foreseen that a national scale project was also on the go and they could base this project on the transitory articles of the law because it was predicted in the law that unless there—until the moment—so those are the kinds of clause that saw another way the Central Election Commission could proceed if the register of the citizens was not totally created.*

Basically they were to physically take the information from the respective local government and create the list of voters—national voter registry.

MAWSON: Okay, so they passed this law in October 2002. Just to clarify, this meant that the pilot project couldn't go on and be put on a national scale unless the civil registries weren't provided by the local level, is that right?

GJOKUTA: *Yes, the project was built in such a way that you would serve, even to the situation that the law itself predicted. For instance, so the law foresaw that a manual procedure could also be carried out. So the pilot project explained the steps that were going to be taken to manually take—how the process was going*

to be carried out, how the information would be manually taken into the Central Election Commission. So there were a lot of technical issues here.

There were a lot of things the pilot project helped to enlighten, to basically improve the quality of the list of voters. I remember for instance a figure from the elections of 2001. There were 20% of the voters on the voters' list, they did not have—there was no specification of the origins where the information was taken from. Which meant that they were people who did not live, basically, in the place where the information came from.

We were questioning the fact whether these people were registered in this place but also in the place where they had gone to live, at their permanent address. So through this project we understood how to basically eliminate these duplications on the list.

MAWSON: Were you able to eliminate the duplications in time for the 2003 election?

GJOKUTA: *They were eliminated but some new problems arose. In my personal opinion, not only a lot of work was done through the pilot project but also there was improvement in the list of voters. It was a good foundation to create also what happened later on. Although in 2003 there were political parties that contested the list of voters.*

MAWSON: Did they contest before or after the election?

GJOKUTA: *After. Because of the things I mentioned before, regarding the updating of the political parties about the process, there was no contestation from the political parties regarding the process, so basically up to the day of the elections—because everything was done through consultations with the political parties. I remember that the senior opposite party officials said that regarding the list of voters there is nothing that we can say about the work of the Central Election Commission because they've done everything that we asked for and that the law foresees.*

MAWSON: That was on election day or just in the run up?

GJOKUTA: *Before the elections and after the elections. Of course, the contesting after the elections was grounded; it was not ungrounded because there were a lot of defects. So of course the problems arose because all the work that was done through the pilot project was basically manually get the registers, the civic registry and put the information in the database, the electronic database. But because we lacked the software and also the capacities it was a problem to double-check the names of people. For instance we once had—because even if a letter was changed in the name of a person, it could basically result in the same person being registered in different places. Once there was a family that was registered in six different places.*

MAWSON: So it was sort of human error because they didn't have enough capacity?

GJOKUTA: *Yes, this is true but there were a lot of factors that led to this. What was noticed was that the law on civic registry was not correctly applicable [indecipherable] from the responsible offices. . When we noticed this we gave to the respective ministry all the records of families. There were families that were registered in more than one registry. We also reported the fact that there were more than 150,000 voters who were registered in more than one registry. The individuals we noticed were registered more than once we did not register these names in*

the list of the voters—. In the voter list they were only one, in one place. So what we proposed, because we made these facts public, and we proposed to the political parties that they would be registered only in one place, on one voter list. We basically explained this to the political parties and they decided they would be registered in the major municipality. Since the trend was that they moved from smaller, rural areas to urban areas.

We also sent the list to the local municipalities so they could double check if these individuals were in the respective commune because it was an overall reviewing of the list. We were seeing that there were contestations after the elections. To my personal opinion the rumor was more political than grounded, based on real facts. During that time the chair of the Central Election Commission, he would explain continuously to the media the whole process. The contestations went to the point that the opposition asked for an investigation from other parties, from international organizations. We were investigated, the Central Election Commission was investigated. There was no mistake, there was no evidence regarding the records.

The opposition was not pleased with this investigation either and the case was sent to the General Attorney. This was only regarding the Tirana district. The General Attorney took the case under investigation and also the General Attorney didn't find any deformation. Meaning that the work done through the pilot project and the work done by the Central Election Commission was good and was effective. Although there were problems which now have been eliminated there were no problems which stem from the work carried out by the Central Election Commission but there were objective problems.

MAWSON: What does that mean objective problems?

GJOKUTA: *Meaning that when the political parties, once the political parties became conscious about the fact that there were voters who could vote in four different areas, they eliminated the problem. The political parties became conscious about this problem in 2007. So basically only the person who is registered at his permanent address could be registered in the list of voters.*

MAWSON: Could I just ask some follow up questions. When you're talking about these facts, when you found some problems with the voter registry before the 2003 elections, you said that these facts were made public and Mr. Celibashi did a good job of being very honest in the media. When were those facts made public, do you remember when this information came out?

GJOKUTA: *Before the elections there was continuous explanation and it was reflected in the media, the work of the compilation of the list of voters. After the elections—before the elections there was only, the Central Election Commission was only informing but following the elections there were debates. Following these debates they needed explanations in the media and also basically educating people about the process, the whole process.*

I remember once in a live program, because the person who was the host of the program was basically saying "I'm not in the list of voters". It was late in the evening and there was a live connection with Mr. Celibashi. So Mr. Celibashi asked us to check his name, what's the problem with this record. We found it. He was on the list of voters. But he was not on the list where he thought he was. He was on the list of voters where the political parties and the Central Election Commission had decided for him to be because basically there was a place where he was registered, where his civic records were. He also had two months

time to check this, personally check this. Also the political parties had this information, that this person, he was here, he was taken out of another place because he cannot be in both places at the same time. So then he, the host of the program, he apologized. This had a positive effect in the public opinion because people understood that sometimes it was their own responsibility, because they didn't check where their name was.

But now it's different. Things are clearer. So one thing that was changed, the legal changes were made but also the automatization, or basically everything is on line, you can find your name on line.

MAWSON: Can I ask also, when you said the Election Commission was investigated, who was running that investigation and when did it start?

GJOKUTA: *The first investigation was carried out by all the representatives, by Mr. Nikolai Vulchanov, he was the leader of the OSCE team. I don't remember exactly the time, it was after the elections, the elections were in October 2003 and the investigation must have started in December 2003. This was the first investigation. They published their results. Then there was the General Attorney that started the investigations. That must have been early 2004. Following the results that were made public by the General Attorney the political party itself wanted to carry out their own investigation. They brought their own specialists; they carried out an investigation for a month.*

MAWSON: This was the Democratic Party?

GJOKUTA: *Yes. During that period that was the opposition. So it was their own specialists who came to carry out their investigation. The head of this team, this investigation team was the actual Minister of Justice. During that time I used to work with him for a month in the same office. They didn't find anything.*

MAWSON: Was that a very stressful time for you? I would imagine it would be, even if you know that you didn't do anything wrong, having lots of people coming to look at your work; was it stressful?

GJOKUTA: *The work during that time was very stressful although I knew where the problems were in the system. It was really stressful. So you have an international investigation, then you have an investigation from the Attorney, then you think it's over, then you have another one. However we were confident and we were relaxed in a way. We were not worried because we knew that the job we had done was very good. It was organized in such a way that it was effective. Mr. Celibashi was really an organized person. He knew how to put people in action and how to make people work. He also knew how to get other people's opinions, to ask for other people's opinions.*

I remember the first meeting I had with Mr. Celibashi as the director. One of the things that stuck in my mind, because he gave me many advices, he advised me that you shouldn't do anything, should not take any action without consulting with the representative of the party that was in the opposition.

MAWSON: So he knew how to navigate politically in a job that was very sensitive.

GJOKUTA: Yes.

MAWSON: So throughout this time when you were having the investigations and everything, Celibashi was supporting you the whole time?

GJOKUTA: *Totally. Once we were in a meeting with the president, me and Mr. Celibashi were the representatives of the Central Election Commission and there were also some representatives of political parties, and in this meeting Mr. Celibashi was attacked harshly by the representatives of the opposition. He knew how to defend himself and to give reasonable arguments. The same way he basically came out of the investigations, him and the institution he represented.*

MAWSON: Could I ask, could you perhaps give me some more examples of that time period when you worked with Mr. Celibashi where you thought that he did a good job of working with the political parties?

GJOKUTA: *So in fact, my personal experience with him, with the voters' lists, he would always take decisions in open meeting with representatives of political parties but he would also meet them personally, he would approach them personally. So regarding the voters' list sometimes we had meetings with representatives of all political parties. So this is, Mr. Celibashi's attitude toward political parties is something that has, having in mind the background of the political reality in Albania where most of the elections are contested and even the present leader, the head of the institution and also the vice, having in mind that it is an institution that administers elections. You have to keep, obviously keep in check with the political parties. Until now there has never been an election that hasn't been contested. The most highly contested was the last one and we hope that after this one there won't be any contestations.*

MAWSON: If you wouldn't mind, do you have more time, I could ask a couple more questions, or are you running out of time?

GJOKUTA: *It doesn't matter for me.*

MAWSON: Just after you'd gone through these investigations, that was after the 2003 elections, you're in 2004 and you're still working on the voter registry after the investigations were finished, so what were the next steps after you had gone through these investigation periods?

GJOKUTA: *The lessons that we learned from the work with compiling the national register of voters, during that time we—the lessons learned were necessary for the future process, we presented them to the government and also the Albanian parliament.*

MAWSON: When was that?

GJOKUTA: *It was like in the beginning of 2004 after the investigations. Actually it was after the statement, the final results of the elections. It took a long time. The elections took place in October 2003 and the final result was made public in February 2004. Mr. Celibashi went to the government; he sent an official letter to the political parties. He explained the steps we followed, that had to be made to amend the law, and also the steps that had to be taken—suggestions about the steps that had to be taken by the government to improve the voters' list. This letter was also forwarded to the representatives of the international bodies present in Tirana.*

Based on that letter—following that letter, at the initiative of the prime minister there was a debate, a fruitful debate with the stakeholders. In November 2004 the parliament approved the law. So there was a law that was passed in November 2004 which was not directly aimed at the voters' list but it was

changed regarding the specification of the voting errors on the permanent addresses. So there were codes put in the errors of houses.

MAWSON: Was this the work of the boundary commission being set up?

GJOKUTA: *It was a temporary law which was in power for four months, November 2004 to February 2005, and it was basically the verification of citizens. It was like a kind of door-to-door registration. It was not a population registration, but it was a checking. This was carried out having a map. It was carried out by having a blueprint of the area and the house would be indicated where the person was living.*

MAWSON: So it was a mapping exercise, where people live.

GJOKUTA: *Yes. This was a lesson that we learned through the pilot project in Durrës and Kavaja. So this was a project, we index the houses with like a virtual number. Every inhabitant was basically indexed with this number. The numbers had different figures; the first numbers identified the electoral zone. Another two figures belonged to the house or the building. So this was the system we used in the pilot project, it was also used in the law.*

MAWSON: So the first two figures were for the zone, the electoral zone, and the last two figures were to show the house.

GJOKUTA: *To be more precise, it is not about the electoral zone, it is about the voting zones. You take the specific municipality, they have a specific code. I just want to give you a general idea; I don't want to give you specific details. To be precise the three figures are the code, represent the code of the civic registry. And four figures represent the voting center. And three numbers represent the building. So the law predicted a code with ten digits. This code is also used in the present electoral code. But now there are other improvements that have taken place because now we have addresses, a system of addresses.*

During that time there was only virtual so these codes and these numbers they represented the areas but only in the map, they were not put in the streets. Now we're putting the names of the streets and numbers, and the apartments.

MAWSON: But it was a way to get over the problem of not having street addresses.

GJOKUTA: *Because during that time also the law for the addresses came out, it was approved but it needed a period to be implemented. So this was a law which kind of adapted to the reality because it was meant to connect the person with where he was really living, so he could be put on the list of voters.*

MAWSON: So there wouldn't be duplications.

GJOKUTA: *So there wouldn't be duplications. During that time the law foresaw that we had to print the list of voters according to the electoral zones, the polling stations. We would send this to the mayors and they had to fill in the code for the civic registry but also the building. Afterwards the responsibility was taken from the Central Election Commission and was given to the Directory of the Civic Registry.*

MAWSON: When did that happen again?

GJOKUTA: *In January, 2005.*

- MAWSON: So there was this temporary law which you said went from November 2004 to February 2005.
- GJOKUTA: *Yes. So in January 2005 the Electoral law changed and it was not the responsibility of the Central Election Commission any more to deal with the list of voters. So it was time when the political conditions matured so that the respective institutions would carry out this process because until then they needed a kind of independent institution to do the job, compiling the list of voters.*
- MAWSON: Because the politics were so polarized?
- GJOKUTA: *They were polarized, there was no trust.*
- MAWSON: Right. So you think it was a good thing that this responsibility was moved away from the Central Election Commission and given to the local levels?
- GJOKUTA: *It was a positive step for sure because practically, they have the records, the civic records. The Central Election Commission was inserted artificially in the system and the responsibility was shared. Now it's the central government's responsibility but also the local government's responsibility.*
- MAWSON: So which part is the central government's responsibility and which part is the local government's?
- GJOKUTA: *Because in those years I was very involved by the list of voters, I continued to follow the issue almost like a hobby. The greater responsibility falls on the local government. The central government, represented by the Director of the Civic Registry gathered the information from the local government and they built a national registry. Everything that is put in the system in the national registry is done in cooperation with the local government. There are some categories of voters, some changes are made for instance because there are some voters for example, some categories of voters that cannot vote in the center where their permanent address is such as soldiers, policemen, prisoners, people in hospitals who stay for a long period. It is the central government that deals with the coordination for these categories of voters.*
- It coordinates the database for instance if a prisoner is detained in Tirana but he is registered in Gjirokastër, he coordinates between them. He tells the local government of Gjirokastër to take it out of the list in Gjirokastër and this is what the central government does. So the law assigns some responsibilities to the central government but the major responsibility falls on the local government.*
- MAWSON: Can I ask you, the fact that this was moved, the responsibility was moved away from the Central Election Commission in January 2005. Do you think that was possible because of the good work the Central Election Commission had done? They had managed to depoliticize the issue somehow by making it more systematic?
- GJOKUTA: *I think this was not the case. I think it was the fact that a fraction of the political parties did not trust enough the Central Election Commission to carry on the process. This was political. But I think the determining factor was the technical issues, the practical issues.*
- MAWSON: Sorry, the political parties, they didn't trust the Central Election Commission to do this work after the Central Election Commission had actually done all of the work?

- GJOKUTA: *This is my personal opinion. There was another project that was carried out in 2001 but I didn't talk about it because I was not working for the CEC.*
- MAWSON: Right.
- GJOKUTA: *It was carried out by the UNDP (United Nations Development Program), OSCE, and IFES. So the bulk was done by the international experts during that time, we're talking about 2001. The Central Election Commission, only two decisions, the bulk of the work was done by them. In 2003 we were assisted by international bodies but the human resources were Albanian. Then in 2003 there was ground for the contesting political parties made for the list but this was not because of the bias of the Central Election Commission but because of technical problems. So then in 2005 it was taken over by the central government, by the government, and there were improvements throughout these five years from 2005-2009. I believe now, at this point, a certain standard has been reached.*
- MAWSON: But it was the Central Election Commission that set them on the road.
- GJOKUTA: *So it is my opinion, my belief, that it was the Central Election Commission that—because this institution was basically responsible, legally responsible to do this. What we did was we evidenced the problems, the anomalies. We made them public and we presented them to the parliament and also to the government. We made the problems present but also the cause of the problems. So it was easier to identify and to change, to make the reform.*
- MAWSON: You think that was possible because of the way the Central Election Commission was being run at that time?
- GJOKUTA: *The Central Election Commission, even legally they cannot hold a meeting that is not public. So basically the whole process is transparent, has to be transparent.*
- MAWSON: But I heard from somebody before that before Celibashi became chair of the Election Commission that the meetings were held publicly but sometimes they would hold them at midnight or at times that it was not convenient for people to come to them. So was that changed?
- GJOKUTA: *I cannot say anything about that period because I was not present. But I know that according to the law the time of the meetings is also—.*
- MAWSON: It's in the law.
- GJOKUTA: *It's in the law but I don't know how it was implemented, how it—. I haven't been here in this period.*
- MAWSON: Do you have any questions Michael?
- SCHARFF: Can I also ask, in relation to—you mentioned there are a number of lessons learned after the '03 elections, the voter registration lists is one of the major issues. But were there any other big lessons learned that perhaps the CEC was able to improve upon post 2003?
- GJOKUTA: *You're asking about the lessons learned from 2003?*
- SCHARFF: Right.

GJOKUTA: *I don't know if I mentioned over the lessons that were taken from—I don't know which one I left out and which one I mentioned. I mentioned a couple but it was on my aim to make a list of the lessons, just like a tangent reference I made. So I'm listing a couple. So one of the lessons for instance that was also mentioned in the letter that was forwarded to the government and the parliament, was the fact that voters could chose to vote either where their permanent address was or in their temporary address. This basically made the whole process very chaotic.*

Another thing was that all those people that were registered in more than one place they had to be eliminated, they had to be registered in only one place. Another lesson was the clear understanding and delineation of the addresses so that we'd know where the person would vote. So there was a system of addresses, we built a virtual system of addresses. This was a lesson that we learned and that we saw through while we were carrying out the pilot project. So these were the major lessons. Maybe there were some other technical issues..

MAWSON: Could I ask one follow up question? Whose idea was it to do this virtual system of addresses?

GJOKUTA: *I don't really remember. From what we discussed with foreign experts and what we read, we noticed that there were other cases, other examples of such nature, and following population registration in 2001 the Statistics Institute had used the very same system to carry out the registration of the population.*

MAWSON: That was like a census in 2001?

GJOKUTA: *Census, yes.*

MAWSON: Just maybe a final, final question. Do you think there are any things or lessons from that time, 2001 to 2005, about how the Election Commission was run, how it was managed that could be useful to other people in other countries facing similar challenges?

GJOKUTA: *Regarding, in relation to?*

MAWSON: In relation to how the institution was managed at the general level.

GJOKUTA: *I think these are things you'll also find in the literature regarding how an institution can be well managed. So the head of the institution has to know all the people well, know their respective capacities.*

MAWSON: And Celibashi was good at doing that?

GJOKUTA: *Yes, yes. He continuously kept them close. He'd talk, he'd talk about different problems and he knew what different people thought about different things. He had the ability to delegate responsibilities and tasks but also the ability to check the process while these things were being carried out. Another skill of his was that he made people optimistic and he gave a kind of energy and input.*

MAWSON: How did he do that?

GJOKUTA: *He was an authoritative leader but he also knew how to talk to you as a friend. He was open, he was sincere. When you have such a boss who knows how to deal with you as an employee but also as a friend, he explains the tasks very well, clears your way from the obstacles you might meet on the way and the employee can ask more from his employer.*

MAWSON: Thank you very much indeed for your time, we really appreciate it.

GJOKUTA: *It was my pleasure.*