

## **Albanien, Deutschland und die Europäischen Union**

### **Ein Gastbeitrag des ehemaligen albanischen Außenministers**

Paskal Milo

#### *Zur Person*

*Paskal Milo (geboren am 22.02.1949) ist ein albanischer Historiker und zeitweiliger Vorsitzender der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Albaniens. Milo ist seit 1992 Mitglied des albanischen Parlaments und war von 1997 bis 2001 Außenminister Albaniens. Sein Gastbeitrag erscheint in englischer Fassung.*

Germany has always been a welcoming place for Albanians. There is a large number of Albanians who live and work here. Many of them have done a good job to make Albania known and to contribute to the development of friendship between our two peoples. In our distant and recent history, there have been many Germans who have demonstrated their respect for Albania and its people, and who have rendered valuable contributions to their history, language, culture and traditions. Among them can be mentioned the father of Albanology Johann George Hahn, historians Georg Stadtmüller and Peter Bartl, linguists Franz Bopp, Gustav Weigand, Wiefried Fiedler and many others. The history of Albanian-German relations has reserved an honorary place to all the German personalities who have placed foundation stones in the friendship between our two nations. Albania is a small Balkan country with a population of over three million. More than three other million live in the neighboring countries of the region, in Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro. Over one million live and work as immigrants in Greece, Italy, Germany and other European countries, and about 500 thousand others live and work in the United States and Canada. Albanians are a people divided by history and poverty, but they always have sought to have a better and safer life.

#### *I. Political developments*

Today's Albania is a much better place than former communist Albania. Almost 25 years have elapsed since the overthrow of the communist regime and progress is tangible everywhere. However, Albanians are not content and rightly so. They have had higher expectations, but, for various factors and reasons, their European dream has not yet become a reality. Their democratic transition has been protracted and very hard, rife in deep political, economic and social crises and in regional conflicts, which have their impact also on Albania. However, it must be said from the start that the main responsibility for this delayed development and weak democratic order in the country lies with Albanian politics and, in particular, with its two largest parties, the Democratic and the Socialist Parties. The Democratic Party, which was formed in December 1990 as a party of the center right, governed Albania for about fourteen years, while the Socialist Party, the former Communist party transformed into a left center party, governed it for about ten years. The last parliamentary elections were held on 23 June 2013. Their winner was the coalition „Alliance for European Albania“, led by the Socialist Party. The Democratic Party passed on to the opposition after eight years in government. Seven political parties are represented in the Albanian parliament. The current government is a coalition between the Socialist Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration Party, which is a center left party. Mr. Edi Rama is Prime Minister, representing the Socialist Party.

Almost three years ago, the current government proclaimed its very ambitious program, so-called „Revival“. It was based on four pillars: Recovery of the Economy, Revival of the Society, Reestablishment of Democracy and Reunion with Europe.

**Recovery of the Economy** implies return to a sustainable economic growth, less debts and greater fiscal stability. It aims at opening up 300 000 new jobs in four years, ensuring a fairer redistribution of the revenues created in the country, better management of natural resources, greater investments in a modern infrastructure, in rural and agricultural development, in contemporary tourism and in a cleaner environment for today and for the future.

**Revival of the Society** in the program of the Socialist Government underlines the delivery of vital services that are accessible and affordable by all, the reform of the pre-university and university education and of the health service, greater care for children, for the elderly and, especially, for the formerly persecuted from the communist dictatorship. An important place in this pillar of its program has the reestablishment of public order, the administrative and territorial reform and others.

**Reestablishment of Democracy** has as its objective the building of a society deeply rooted in democracy, based on a true democratic culture, the strengthening of the rule of law, the dismantling of the corruptive system and the culture of impunity, the establishment of a public administration in the service of the citizens and not of political parties, the protection and respect for property rights, the regeneration of the local autonomy, the revival of civil society, the full reestablishment of the freedom of the media and real respect for freedom of thought, beliefs, religion, religious organizations under their own rules and respect for all their rights.

**Reunion with Europe:** the programmatic pillar of the foreign policy of the Socialist Government is based on the European belonging and vocation of Albanians, the granting of the country its candidate status and the opening of negotiations for membership into the European Union.

This ambitious program of the Socialist Government has started to be implemented in some of its priority directions. The territorial administrative reform was already carried out, therefore out of 373 local units that the country has at present, after the new local elections, it will have only 61 units. The reform in the civil administration, accompanied by the relevant legislative amendments, guarantees for the first time the status of the civil servant. This reform is being monitored by the European Union. The new law on higher education approved a few months ago, as well as a new system of taxation and important amendments to the Labor Law are an essential part of this process. However, Albania needs more reforms, one of the most important being the reform in the justice system. For years now, there have been talks about the necessity of such a reform because of the major issues existing in this system. It is highly necessary that this reform takes place in order to establish an impartial, independent and transparent rule of law. Therefore, an ad hoc parliamentary committee has been set up and is actually working to finalize this project and the EU, the OSCE, and the Venice Commission have constantly assisted Albania in this direction. Moreover, due to the institutional reforms, the Albanian Constitution will be considerably amended in 2016.

Albania has suffered and continues to suffer from the typical phenomena of the countries in transition, particularly, the Balkan countries. Organized crime, illegal trafficking, especially trafficking in human being and narcotics, corruption, informality and others are serious wounds but also major challenges for Albania today and in the future. The new administration has undertaken important steps in efficiently cracking down on

organized crime, on the cultivation, processing and trading of narcotics in the country and, particularly, on the utilization of Albania as a regional corridor in the international narcotics trade. However, there is still much to be done. The fight on corruption remains one of the most important challenges for Albanian society. It is a fact that Albania is one of the countries with a high corruption level in the region.

The process of reforms in Albania is made more difficult because of the exacerbated political climate. The country lacks the culture of dialogue and compromise. The party that wins the parliamentary elections seeks to control all the branches of power and the state institutions. The party that loses the elections refuses any form of cooperation and abandons everything. This has always been the landscape of political life in Albania, which reflects also the level of democracy in the country. The Albanian political system is actually in crisis. Its roots lie equally in the patrimony and influences of the communist past and in the distortion of the democratic processes of building the country's institutions, the establishment of the rule of law and the implementation of European standards. The two largest political parties are the main factor accountable for the decay of the system. In their programs, they may seem democratic, but in essence and in the way they behave, they are political and organizational creations that reflect the hard period of transition from communism to democracy. They continue to have in their leadership former communists or the heirs of the former communist nomenclature. They lack internal democracy; their elections for their leading organs are a mere formality. Fractions are not allowed and alternative opinions are considered a heresy. The role of the leader is absolute and his decisions indisputable.

The „sui generis“ nature of these parties that have rotated power for almost a quarter of a century has shaped also the political life and the Albanian institutions. A very tense atmosphere still prevails between the governing majority and the opposition. This climate becomes even tenser after the local elections of 21 June 2015. Their major topics of debates are not the topics that concern the citizens, or the economic and social issues, but only topics of a political character, fraught with accusations and counteraccusations. In Albania today, there are rumors about special links of certain segments of politics with the crime. There are reasons and facts to believe that in the Albanian Parliament there are some deputies linked with ordinary and organized crime. They have entered parliament due to the lack of legal obstacles and the irresponsible stands of the party leaders, who are the ones that draw up the lists of candidates for deputies. Such a worrying phenomenon not only for the Albanian parliament, but also for all the police and judiciary structures has become the issue of the day in Albania. It has also drawn the attention of international partners, including the German Government and the Federal Parliament. They have suggested and are urging the institutions of the Albanian state to embark on the process of decriminalization, starting first of all with Parliament. For this purpose, on 24 December 2014, a Resolution was adopted for the establishment of a Parliamentary Committee on the Decriminalization of Parliament. One year later, the relevant law has been approved.

Equally important as decriminalization is also the protection of institutions and the high public administration from the infiltration of former communist state secret service agents. In the past post-communist period, a few modest efforts were made to fight this phenomenon, but they failed. In April 2015, the Albanian Parliament, encouraged by civil society, has approved the law on the files of the former communist regime State Security. In developing this law, the legislator referred to the German experience in addressing the issue of the Stasi files. However, notwithstanding such difficulties, Albania has progressed on its path to build a democratic society. In general, human

rights and the rights of minorities are respected. There is still work to be done in order for these rights to reach European standards. Furthermore, media enjoys a greater freedom, but its major segments suffer from clientelism. Albania is known for the harmony and coexistence of its religious communities. This is a phenomenon with deep historical roots. The population of the country is composed of over 50 percent Muslims, divided in two rites, Suni and Bektashi, and about 50 percent Christians, Orthodox and Catholics and others. Either erroneously or deliberately Albania is often considered a Muslim country. A wrong decision of the Albanian conservative government of 1992 to adhere to the Conference of Islamic Countries in the recent years is also to some extent to blame for that opinion. This decision was never ratified by the Albanian Parliament and participation of Albania in this organization is almost non-existent.

Religion in Albania is separate from the state. Albania is a European country in terms of its geography and history. Muslim and Christian Albanians are well aware of their roots and origin in a nation to which foreign occupiers have wished to dictate their religion, language and traditions. But, they have withstood such attempts in the course of centuries and preserved their identity, coexistence and reciprocal respect, irrespective of their religious beliefs. In Albania religious harmony is respected as a valuable asset of the country. Its symbolic significance shall be perpetuated also in the building soon of a natural park planted with two thousand flowers and plants mentioned in Quran and in the Bible. In his visit to Albania in September 2014, even Pope Francis expressed his appreciation for the brilliant example of its religious coexistence. There is no religious extremism in Albania. Among its numerous examples, suffice it to mention that of mixed marriages, which are quite common in Albania. Religious extremists may be found everywhere, even in the EU countries. Albania too is no exception in this regard. The tens of Albanians that have embraced Islamic extremism cannot be taken as an example to brand Albania an Islamic country, nor can they cast doubts on Albanians' European identity and their future in the family of United Europe.

## *II. The socio-economic situation of the country*

Prior to the transition from communism to democracy, Albania had a centralized and backward socialist economy. Therefore, after the fall of the communist regime, very few people knew anything about the market economy. The country started to implement the model of economic development based on the general principles of the functioning of the market economy that suited its conditions. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the EU and other institutions have rendered Albania a major contribution to the development and implementation of this concept. This development model of the transition period helped the country's economic growth, despite its weaknesses. However, 25 years after and in new circumstances, this model has worn out. The need has arisen for establishing a new economic model, in order to guarantee a sustainable economic growth. The current Government Strategy proclaimed almost three years ago aims at ensuring the economic restructuring, an increased domestic production, greater exports, the diversification of products and services and the mass adoption of new technologies. The development objectives have given priority to such sectors as energy, tourism, agro-industry, services, education and others. Three years after the launch of this model, the above promises have not been kept. As IMF recently noted, the economy is still below its potential. The economic growth (GDP) in 2014 was about 2% and was foreseen to be 3% in December 2015. 85 000 active enterprises operate in Albania, most of which engage in services, mainly in the trade sector. Albania is rich in chrome,

copper, iron and nickel resources. The production of crude oil in 2014 was 1.4 million ton as against 1.2 million ton in 2013. Agricultural economy is a major economic activity, accounting for more than 18% of the GDP. However, although export of farming produce increased by 40% in 2014, compared to 2013, their imports are still seven times higher. Promotion of farming produce and increase of their exports remains one of the main challenges for the Albanian economy.

The government is carrying out a reform for the restructuring of the financial system. For this purpose, it has had the assistance of IMF and the World Bank. The currency is stable, inflation remains at the modest rate of 1.6 %. However, the system is suffering from some worrying phenomena. The banking system which accounts for the backbone of the financial system is not giving a lot of new credits to the economy. The bad loans account for about 24% of the loan portfolio, 7–8% more than the average of the region. The public debt in 2014 accounted for 71% of the GDP and in 2015, approximately 2% more than the above. The Government is committed to reducing it to 60% by 2018. Trade deficit accounts for 14% of the GDP, a figure that was foreseen to remain unchanged during 2015. Foreign direct investments are a very important source of economic development for the country. Due also to the global financial crisis, foreign direct investment rate in Albania has declined. Out of the bulk of foreign investments, 31% originate from Greece. German investments account for about 3.7% of total foreign investments, mainly in the field of energy, tourism, infrastructure, agriculture, telecommunication, water management, vocational education and others. According to INSTAT, the number of registered German or joint Albanian German enterprises in Albania is 148. The current government is taking measures to improve the climate for the development of foreign businesses. It is establishing a favorable tax system, a liberal tax framework, trying to resolve the problematic issue of property over the land and defining the priority sectors for foreign investments. Government reforms for the moment promise only a modest improvement in the economic situation of the people. In terms of most of its economic, financial and social indicators, Albania continues to remain one of the poorest countries in Europe. Officially, the unemployment rate is 18%, ranking third in the region after Macedonia and Bosnia Hercegovina. The high unemployment rate among youths is about 34%. The minimal wage in Albania is 156 Euros, while the average wage is 377 Euros. In terms of its average wage, Albania comes after Montenegro with 473 Euros, Bosnia-Hercegovina with 423 Euros and Serbia with 381 Euros. Income per head by the end of 2014 was as much as 30% of the European Union average. The number of Albanian citizens who have retired is about 590 000, of whom 150 000 live in the countryside. The average income from pension in the towns is about 115 Euros, while in the villages, about 55 Euros.

### *III. International position*

The Albanian internal political and economic developments are influenced also by international circumstances. Albania is not an isolated country like it was in the time of communism. Today Albania is an active participant in international life. It is member of the United Nations Organization and takes part in the work of all its committees and agencies. As of 1991, Albania is a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). In 1995, it became a member of the Council of Europe and in 2008; it became a member of NATO. In 2014, it was granted the status of the candidate country for the EU. Albania takes part also in international economic, financial and trade organizations. Its presence in such organizations has guaranteed the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. Such organizations have rendered a valuable contribution to Albania in helping it overcome political,

economic and social crisis during the period of its hard and protracted transition. They have given a great assistance to Albania in building its democratic institutions, in ensuring respect for human rights and freedoms of the minorities, in the fight on organized crime, illegal trafficking and corruption and in the consolidation of its political stability. For its part, Albania has tried to give its contribution as a member country in such organizations to the consolidation of peace and international and regional security. From a country that consumed security, Albania is today a country that produces security. It is a factor that has made a major contribution to the ending of regional conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, in Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia. Albania has joined forces with NATO and its allies against international terrorism in joint missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Albania has also joined the international community efforts to face up to the dangers coming from Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, particularly those from the Islamic State (ISIS). It has undertaken a number of measures together with the other countries of the region to prevent certain citizens indoctrinated with Islamic extremism to go to Syria, or to return from there in order to recruit other elements for terrorist activities. It is a fact that the tens of Muslim Albanian individuals, who have gone to Syria, along with many others from different countries, cannot in any way question the willingness and solidarity of all Albanians to fight the terrorist Islamic State.

Albania's foreign policy has always aimed at establishing and maintaining friendly relations and cooperation with all the countries. Today it has diplomatic relations with 215 countries of the world and 49 diplomatic and consular missions accredited in Europe, North and South America, Asia and Africa, and in some international organizations. Albania established diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany on 2 October 1987. Until then, it used to have diplomatic relations only with the East German communist state. Formal Albanian-German relations were established over a century ago, in 1914, when German Prince Wilhelm Heinrich Wied came to Albania as head of the Albanian kingdom. After the First World War, with the restoration of the independent Albanian State, Albania established in 1923 diplomatic relations with Germany and respective diplomatic missions opened in Berlin and Tirana.

In the Cold War period, Albanian-German relations remained ransom to it. During the savage communist regime and under the Soviet dictate, Albania refused to establish diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic of Germany. Enver Hoxha, the communist leader remained faithful almost until he died to the Stalinist policy towards the German issue. He conditioned the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries with the payment of war reparations. Only in the summer of 1984, some months prior to his death, Enver Hoxha allowed the historic visit to Albania of the Prime Minister of Bavaria, Franz Josef Strauß. During this visit, but more so during his second visit, Mr. Strauß gave the Albanian communist leaders valuable advice on how to build their relations with the Federal Republic of Germany. He paved the way for the official establishment of these relations in October 1987. More than 28 years have elapsed since that date. Albanian-German relations have undergone a vigorous development in all fields, political, economic, trade, cultural and others. Germany has given Albania constant assistance to build its democratic institutions with European standards and in its Euro-Atlantic integration process. This was shown also in 2014 when EU gave Albania the candidate status in which Germany's contribution was of primary importance.

The level of political relations between the two countries is high. The governments, parliaments and the other state institutions have constant exchanges and consultations regarding bilateral relations, the situation in the region, and their cooperation in relation to international organizations. Two years ago, Prime Minister Rama made an official visit to Berlin. Chancellor Merkel visited Albania in the beginning of July 2015. Cooperation in the economic field has made steps ahead, but there is still much to be done. In terms of contributions in the context of EU assistance, Germany holds first place as a donor to Albania. There are some important German companies and banks present in the country. Germany ranks among the six trade partners of Albania in terms of export and fourth in terms of import. Trade exchanges between both countries in 2013 were 282 million Euros. Germany and Albania have exchanges and cooperation in the fields of education, science and culture. German language is taught in Albanian schools; there are mutual university links and many Albanian students study in various German universities. Various joint scientific conferences, art exhibitions, and cultural manifestations are organized in Tirana, Munich, Berlin and in other German cities.

Albania has friendly relations of cooperation with all the EU member countries. In particular it has close partnership relations with Italy, the neighbor country with which it shares the Adriatic Sea. The Albanian governments have recognized Italy as a strategic ally. Italian contribution to political, economic and political stability of Albania in the transition period has been considerable. There are some 1 400 Italian small and medium enterprises in the country. In the field of bilateral relations, Italy is the largest donor to Albania. In the foreign policy of the Albanian state, relations with the United States of America occupy a favorite place. This is explained with historical reasons, but also with the role that the United States has played in Albania's democratic developments, the building of its institutions during the transition period, its political stability, and in its international support. One of the basic components of Albania's foreign policy is its relations with the neighboring countries. In the Balkans, these relations have been until the recent past complex and problematic. History and nationalism have left deep traces in the political and social circles of the countries of the region. The traditional appellation of the Balkan region as a „powder keg“ is outdated now; however, the region continues to suffer from some conflictual reminiscences. Albania has always been a factor of peace in the Balkans. It has implemented a policy of good neighborly relations and understanding in the region. The Albanian Government program claims to have no problems with its neighbors. Presently, it is still a promise, since in reality it has some problems with its neighbors. Serbia is not a direct neighbor to Albania as of 1999, but because of Kosovo, it is still perceived as such. The Albanian-Serbian relations are still influenced by the heavy burden of their past history. In a way we can draw a parallel with the German-French relations after World War II. These relations are and will continue also in the future to be held ransom to the status of Kosovo, the relations of Pristina with Belgrade. The agreement of Kosovo and Serb Governments in April 2013 brought about a relative lowering of the tension between the two countries. Their talks held with the mediation of Brussels continue, but they are more dictated than the outcome of their own free volition. For as long as Serbia fails to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign and independent state, it is hardly possible that there will be a climate of understanding and reconciliation established between Albanians and Serbs. The actual Albanian government has made efforts for the improvement of the relations with Serbia. The first visit of an Albanian prime minister in Belgrade after 68 years took place in December 2014. It did not mark, as expected, a turning point in the Albanian-Serbian relations. Serbian Prime Minister visited Albania in 2015. Both governments have

shown willingness to further develop relations between these countries, in the framework of regional cooperation in various fields and EU integration. The geopolitical reasons for holding Serbia close must not compromise the integration process and the future of Kosovo. It comes naturally to the government of Albania to demonstrate a high sensitivity towards developments in Kosovo and the belated process of visa liberalization by the EU. However, such a delay is no reason for discontent and for finding consolation in the emotional nationalistic statements on the union of Kosovo with Albania. Such a union shall take place only through the integration process of both countries in the European Union. The Government program defines Greece as a strategic partner of Albania. The neighborliness between the two countries, their membership in NATO, and their common European aspiration are sufficient reasons to justify this preference for Greece in the foreign policy of the Albanian State. In reality, beyond the rhetoric of diplomacy, the relations between the two countries are good, but far from being very close and at the level of strategic partners. There is a Greek minority in Albania and hundreds of thousands of Albanian emigrants who live and work in Greece. In terms of investments and trade, Greece ranks among the top countries in relation to Albania. The relations between the two countries are permeated by a light mist of distrust which now and again manifests itself in the form of slight tensions over certain issues. They are the byproduct of history, respective mentalities, mutual suspicions and their difficulties to find the right solutions. A problem we have inherited from World War II is that known by the name of Chameria question. At the end of that war, the bulk of Albanian minority living in the Chameria region in Greece was forcefully expelled by the nationalistic Greek General Napoleon Zervas. Their properties were seized and they are not allowed to return to their lands or to be compensated. The Greek Governments do not recognize the Cham issue officially. The Greek governments have often complained against the denial or the restriction of Greek minority rights in Albania. There are still disputable issues between the two countries, like those of the continental shelf in the maritime boundaries in the Ionian Sea, and the water regime management in the Vjosa River. The New Greek Government so far has not shown any special attention to Albania. Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras is expected to visit Albania sometime in the near future.

Albania's relations with the other neighbor Former Yugoslavia Republic of Macedonia are normal and cooperative in fields of mutual interest. There is a good level of trade exchanges with a positive balance for FYROM. There is a small Macedonian minority in Albania who enjoys their fundamental rights. The Albanian minority in Macedonia accounts for about 25 % of the population. Their relations with the Macedonian majority are delicate and prone to tensions even at the slightest provocation. The Albanians demand full implementation of the Ohrid Agreement of August 2001. They are very interested in the unblocking of FYROM's integration process in the Euro-Atlantic structures, which is not making any headway due to its disagreement with Greece over its name. The Albanian Government supports FYROM's NATO membership. Albania's relations with Montenegro, our northern neighbor, are very good. It has relations of cooperation with it in all fields. There is an Albanian minority living in Montenegro, which constitutes 7 percent of the total population. Albania has special relations also with Turkey. Indeed the Albanian Government has raised them to the level of strategic partnership. Turkey is very present in Albania through its trade and investments. Visits are exchanged and regular political consultations held, and there is bilateral military cooperation also in the context of NATO. The high-level relations with Turkey are based also on our common traditions. The centuries of coexistence under the Ottoman Empire



have left their traces in Albania in many aspects. Such traces are linking bridges, but they should not be allowed to be misused for geopolitical ends, which would be detrimental to the European belonging and aspirations of Albania. Albania takes an active part in the organizations of regional cooperation in the framework of South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). Regional cooperation is a condition for EU integration of Western Balkan countries. Albania took part in the Berlin Conference in August 2014, initiated by Chancellor Merkel with the heads of governments of the Western Balkan countries. This conference which demonstrated the high interest of Germany to support the integration process of these countries into the EU marked the beginning of an institutionalized process of regional cooperation. The initial idea for such cooperation was launched in Berlin, while in the second conference held in Vienna in August 2015, concrete projects of cooperation in important fields like infrastructure, energy, tourism etc. have been approved with the support of EU.

#### *IV. Albania and European Union*

Albania's membership into the European Union is a strategic aim and a national objective. Immediately after the overthrow of communism, Albanians almost unanimously voiced their readiness to build a European Albania and to be integrated in the Euro-Atlantic structures. In 1992, the Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement was signed between Albania and the European Union. The Stabilization and Association Agreement was signed in 2006. In June last year, Albania was granted the status of candidate country for membership into the European Union. Its short-term objective is the opening of negotiations for EU membership. In order for Albania to come this far, it had to traverse a relatively long and laborious path. Initially, Albanians had a rather naive perception of European integration. The Albanian policy has made unpardonable mistakes, which have resulted in profound political, economic and social crises, leaving the country behind in the fulfillment of the basic criteria of Copenhagen. The national conflicts in the region during the 90s of last century accounted for the delayed integration processes in the Western Balkans, including Albania. The country's membership in the European Union is a major challenge for its people of which they have become conscious now. They are less enthusiastic than they were 20 years ago and more realistic about the difficulties of the full integration process. They know that in the EU countries, people are tired of hearing about the enlargement. But they are afraid that they will likewise tire out waiting at the doors of the EU. The current difficulties of the EU are understandable. The process of European Union building is passing through untrodden paths and often the obstacles faced cause nervousness, hesitation and misunderstandings. However, neither Albania nor any other Balkan country is responsible for such negative phenomena. They are part of Europe and as such they cannot be denied their European perspective, as given xenophobic voices of European politics hold. Due to its history, traditions and European perspectives, Albania deserves to become a full member of the European Union. But it has to fulfill the required standards and close the identified gaps. The European Commission has set a roadmap of five priorities for Albania as a precondition for starting negotiations for its EU membership. They are the following:

1. Reform of the public administration with a view to enhance its professionalism and de-politicization.
2. Further action to reinforce the independence, efficiency and accountability of judicial institutions.

3. Further determined efforts in the fight against corruption, including towards establishing a solid track record of proactive investigations, prosecutions and convictions.
4. Further determined efforts in the fight against organized crime, including towards establishing a solid track record of proactive investigations, prosecutions and convictions.
5. Effective measures to reinforce the protection of human rights, including those of the Roma community, to implement anti-discrimination policies and to enforce legislation on property rights.

The Albanian Government is working to fulfill such key priorities prompted by its ambitious objective of opening up negotiations for EU membership. The EU institutions, the Commission and Parliament are closely monitoring its efforts to realize these five priorities. The Commissioner for Enlargement Johannes Hahn has underlined the progress made in the work to fulfill these key priorities. However, as he suggested, the issue is not the speed but the quality of the process. In various occasions during 2015, Brussels has clearly stated that only upon realization of the justice reform, Albania will have the chance for the opening of EU membership negotiations. The European Parliament has discussed and approved some resolutions on Albania which were balanced documents expressing appreciation for some achievements in the public administration reform and the enforcement of the law on the civil service, supporting the agreement of 24 December 2014 on decriminalization and the steps undertaken in the fight on corruption and organized crime. The Resolutions contains a number of major recommendations for the Albanian political class, Parliament and Government. They require the full enforcement of the law on the establishment of a depoliticized public administration, free from corruption and organized crime. The Resolutions voice the EU concern over the infiltration of criminal circles in public posts, particularly, in the judiciary. In such cases, they recommend a serious review of the candidates and the immediate dismissal of all the persons linked with organized crime. The Resolutions note the issues facing the Albanian judiciary like the politicization of its organs, the high level corruption and the weaknesses in the fight against it. The European Union shall offer it all the necessary assistance to tackle such issues.

During 2015, another concern has arisen in the relations of Albania with some EU member countries: namely the sharp increase in the number of persons who seek asylum there. According to German official statistics provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, about 67 000 Albanians sought asylum in Germany from January 2014 until November 2015. Such large-scale migration of people is the case not only with Albania, but also with Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia and others. The main reason is the high poverty and unemployment rate, particularly among the younger generation. However, there is also another reason for that. Under the guise of tourist agencies, certain Mafia circles, which avail themselves of people's hopeless situations, have been spreading the news that allegedly Germany is in need of labor force and organizing the departure of such people against the payment of exorbitant sums of money. The Albanian Government has taken strict measures to control such exodus of asylum seekers to the EU countries, particularly to Germany, through the Tirana airport and the other border control posts. It has held the organizers of such exodus campaigns from Albania legally responsible. This is a preventive policy that does not resolve the problem, which in fact is the high unemployment rate. Its solution lies only in the promotion of economic growth and investments in the creation of new jobs.