

Conference notes EGMONT

Summary of the conference

"Albania speeding-up towards Euro-Atlantic integration. More NATO and more EU in the Western Balkans"

with H.E. Prof. Dr. Sali Berisha,
Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania,
Brussels, 30 Jan. 2008

Summary; this is not an official record of proceedings and specific remarks are not necessarily attributable.

Progress in the implementation of SAA and reforms in the area of economy, the judiciary, education and e-government, as well as regional issues, including Kosovo's status, topped the speech of Albanian Prime Minister Berisha in Brussels.

Charles Michel, Belgian Minister of Development and Cooperation

Charles Michel, Belgian Minister of Development and Cooperation, welcomed Mr. Berisha, Prime Minister of Albania. He referred to the special relation between Albania and NATO. In 1992, Albania was the first former communist country to announce publicly that it wished to join the Alliance. Two years later, it joined the North Atlantic cooperation council. It also joined the PfP. Its participation in the Membership Action Plan started in April 1999 reflecting its Atlantic aspirations.

Mr. Michel praised Albania for its contribution to NATO's operations in Afghanistan since 2003 and its helpful positive role it plays in the region.

Mr. Michel acknowledged that progress has been achieved in the political, military and security-sector reforms, but he said some important reforms remain to be completed, esp. to improve the efficiency of the judicial system.

Belgium is a firm supporter of the open door policy that NATO is applying for the countries who fulfil the set of conditions, said Mr. Michel. If Albania could receive an invitation to the NATO membership in Bucharest, this would strengthen the political impetus for the rest of the region to take further reforms.

Albania signed the SAA in 2006. Mr Michel announced that its ratification in Belgium is well advanced and hopes that the process will be completed in April. The interim agreement has entered into force in December 2006. Its implementation goes smoothly and will enable Albania to seize all opportunities of full access to the EU market.

Mr Michel repeated that EU membership and integration in NATO is performance based: every development has to be assessed on the basis of tangible progress in several fields. Priority is given to the political criteria, democracy, rule of law, full cooperation with ICTY, control of armed forces etc. He is confident that Albania will continue to make progress in these areas.

Mr Sali Berisha, Prime Minister of Albania

Mr Sali Berisha, Prime Minister of Albania, thanked Belgium for its outstanding and very important support to Albania during its efforts to build a democracy and a functioning market economy. Reaching European standards and the NATO military criteria is fundamental for Albania which is undergoing changes on a daily basis.

During a transition period of 15 years, Albania faced serious difficulties, such as rampant corruption, crime and trafficking, but “now, this is the past!”, underlined Mr. Berisha. Albania changed from a country with a deep isolation, total militarism, poverty to a country with a functioning democracy, a consolidated pluralism, respect for minority rights, free media, free market economy.

The government has defined as priorities the consolidation of the rule of law, a zero tolerance fight against organised crime and corruption, bringing the nation to the digital era, making Albania the most attractive country for foreign investment.

Mr. Berisha detailed the comprehensive strategy to fight criminal organisations and stressed that Albania is now one of the safest countries in Europe. Measures to end corruption comprise downsizing the government, reducing the number of employees in the administration and of civil servants, putting new standards in public offices and fighting smuggling, evasion... The government succeeded to reduce the operative expenses from 3% of GDP to 2.1% of GDP. It also increased budgetary revenues from 22% to 27% GDP.

As Albania wants to enhance its business climate, the focus is put on removing bureaucratic obstacles and reforming the tax and tariff regime. We lowered for example corporate tax from 25% to 10% and small business tax is lowered by 50%. Albania is the country with the lowest fiscal burden in Europe, underlined Mr. Berisha. Our economy is young and has a real perspective! Albania has an enormous potential for investment in energy, hydropower, mines, tourism. It is rich in chromium, bauxite, iron and copper.

Another priority is the reform of the educational system and an e-government which are vital to a modern Albania. The government doubled the budget for education and encourages the private sector to participate in educational reforms. Also e-tax and e-customs are being promoted for the moment.

Mr Berisha said he presented Albania's reforms in the NATO HQ. He informed the ambassadors that 'judicial and electoral reforms are going very well. The opposition brought in Parliament a resolution to work together in all NATO reforms and progress is ongoing'.

Mr. Berisha is expecting to receive the invitation to join NATO at the Bucharest Summit (in April) and stressed that more than 94% of the people supports this membership. He told that Albania created all facilities for NATO peacekeeping operations in the region and that Albanians opened their houses to refugees during the Kosovo conflict. Albania's units are deployed in Bosnia, in Afghanistan and in Iraq. It is sending additional troops to Afghanistan for training the Afghan army and it is preparing a unit for the EU's mission in Chad.

Mr. Berisha repeated that Albania signed the SAA in 2006 and that his country “is implementing very seriously the interim agreement”. He referred to the last report of EU

Commission which is “clearly positive”. It shows that Albania is working for EU standards as a condition sine qua non to receive the ticket for EU membership.

Albania plays clearly a positive role in the region, working together with EU and NATO to solve problems. Concerning the question of Kosovo, Albania is supporting Ahtisaari’s project “as the best project which should provide for the largest existing standards for minorities and have respect for the will of the people of Kosovo for independency”.

Mr. Berisha expects a final decision in the weeks to come. He appealed to the Kosovo authorities to work closely with EU and NATO members and not to show a triumphalist attitude. Therefore, it is crucial that the international community will send clear messages to Belgrade that such behaviour will be totally unacceptable. He underlined that it is also important to stick to international borders in order to foster stability in the region, to look towards regional cooperation and to see our future in Europe.

Summary by X. Vanlauwe