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**Albania-EU Relationship and the
Course towards the European Integration**

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Abstract: The collapse of the communist regime in Albania made possible the country's opening to the west, a country that had chosen the way of total isolation. Albania was the first country in the Balkans region who signed a commercial agreement in 1992 with the European Union. This article aims to study Albania's path towards European integration. The position and role played by the European Union during that critical period for our country, as the crisis of 1997. The objective of this paper is to create a clear panorama of relationships between the EU and Albania and to highlight the problems that have come across over the years. The author of this paper will also provide an overview of the political developments in Albania after the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. The method of operation is qualitative. This paper was accomplished through a bibliographic research, drawing on the European Union legislation, the agreements signed between the two countries and also the strategies of the Albanian government during these years.

Keywords: The European integration; SAA; diplomatic relations; development

1. Introduction

Albania reappeared on the international scene, immediately after the fall of dictatorships and the collapse of communist regime in Tirana. It has succeeded against a dictatorship that was known for its hardness and leaving the country in total darkness, but this instantaneous variation, caused considerable civil disturbances. The communist regime in Albania was one of the longest regimes in the Western Balkans and also one of the most regressive countries of Eastern Europe, not only in the economic viewpoint but also in the social areas.

But we cannot agree that this has been the biggest challenge of the Albanian society. The biggest problem was of a political nature, where the efforts and authoritarian ways of the Albanian political class resulted in an extremely poor dialogue between the main political parties. One of the characteristics of contemporary political life in the country is the way that Albanian politicians tend to inhibit the normal development of the post-election policy, rejecting the election results, when they are on the losing side.

The first diplomatic relationships between Albania and the European Community began in 1991, immediately after the fall of the communist regime. Until that time, the forced division of Europe was

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created by the Cold War and the mutual incompatibility of ideologies and models of economic and social development. Except for the former Yugoslavia, the Economic relationships between the European Community and Albania were more or less similar to other countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

2. Albania and the European Policies in the Balkans

Since the early 90s until today, the secession of Slovenia and Croatia, the independence of Kosovo, the political developments in the Western Balkans are characterized by a explicit attitude towards the division of territories. Since 1996, the EU has tried to create a regional approach in the context of establishing relationships with the regional countries: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

The goal of this approach is supported by the implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement¹ and the establishment of political stability and economic prosperity, which will be based on several principles:

- a) the protection of democracy and the rule of the law;
- b) Respect of the human rights and minorities;
- c) the recovery of the economic activity.

In 1999, the European Commission established the terms for a new approach to the territories of the former Yugoslavia, laying the foundations for the Stabilization and Association process, which is otherwise known as the EU project for Southeast Europe.

With the approval of the Thessaloniki Agenda, in 2003, there has been a qualitative step for the relationship between the EU and the Western Balkans. One of the major challenges at the basis of the EU policy in the last decade, is the integration of the Balkans in the European Union, also a powerful incentive for the modernization, stabilization and democratization of the region.

The European Commission, in recent years in the framework of the Stabilization and Association Agreement has developed numerous instruments to support and effectively promote the integration process of the Balkans into the European Union. The Stabilization and Association Agreement is the foundation of the relationships between the EU and the Western Balkans.

The three main objectives of this process include: the stabilization of countries in transition and their rapid accession into the market economy, the promotion of the regional cooperation and the eventual membership in the EU, if the conditions for membership are fulfilled².

The Western Balkans continue to be one of the key challenges of the European Union. The stability of the countries that are part of this region, is closely connected to the old continent, this due to their geographic and geostrategic position. Unanimously the belief of the EU as an international actor, in majority depends on its interaction in this region (Gori, 2007, p. 5). Brussels has not invested in any other area, as much as it has invested in the Balkan region, spending there millions of euros.

We can say that unlike at the beginning, when the relationship with these countries were established,

¹ The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as the Dayton Agreement, Dayton Accords, Paris Protocol or Dayton-Paris Agreement, is the peace agreement reached at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio in November 1995, and formally signed in Paris on 14 December 1995. These accords put an end to the three and a half-year long Bosnian War, one of the armed conflicts in the former Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia.

²This process helps these countries to develop the capacity for adopting and implementing the EU legislation. The relationship between Western Balkan countries and the EU are based on the following pillars: (i) concessions (ii) economic and financial assistance (CARDS since 2007 has been replaced by IPA) (iii) the Stabilization and Association Agreement

previously in one country and later elsewhere, the EU today has all the necessary instruments, experience and all strategies to assist and come to help all the countries of the region in their European journey¹. So if we try to highlight what is needed at the present, EU must decisively continue with the initiatives taken, which should lead to the “Europeanization of the Balkans”.

In March 2006, at the end of an informal meeting of the foreign European Union ministers, held in Salzburg, was issued a statement in which was argued that the enlargement process relates not only to the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria of the countries that want to be part of the European family², but also by the capacity of the European Union to “absorb” new members. This makes us think that this issue will be in constant change, in the framework of foreign policy pursued by the EU, also by the political will of the current members.

Another approach appears in 2008 within the EU, the European Commission reaffirmed the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. From this moment, the Western Balkans countries have succeeded in various steps, and in others less, as has been observed in their progress during these years.

Brussels has invested so much in the Western Balkans, having spent billions of euro for humanitarian assistance, the material and institutional construction, supporting with commitment and the monetary cost of five ESDP missions³.

The Balkans have represented a fundamental test for the development of the international role of the EU. Based on EU’s experience in the Balkans from the moment of the communist regimes fall, we can say that the EU has demonstrated that it has received the appropriate lessons for developing peace⁴ and play an essential role in the events that also led in the fall of Milosevic.

The first European policies toward the Balkan countries were set by two crisis that disturbed the Balkans, the Albanian crisis of 1997 and that of Kosovo in 1999. In 1997, the violent protests, that erupted to denounce the collapse of the pyramidal schemes, drove the country into chaos, at the limits of civil war. Its effects were more pronounced in the southern part of the country, with the city of Vlora as the epicenter.

Faced with this dramatic situation, for the first time the EU was in trial, despite the initial premises to create a new regional approach, it showed that there were no proper mechanisms in order to resolve problems of this type. In fact the function of this organization became a secondary role, in the framework of the OSCE initiative with the generous support of Italy.

Another success, that can be attributed to the European Union, is the development of a strategy enshrined in Thessaloniki in 2003, that laid the basis for the Stabilization and Association Agreement for the progression and full integration of all Balkan countries.

Twelve years ago the leaders of the European Union, under the leadership of the Greek Presidency, in the city of Thessaloniki gave vent to the idea for a big project in the Balkan region, “*The future of the Balkans is in the European Union*”, deciding the year 2014 as a time limit. By that time more than a decade has past and only two Balkan countries are members with full rights (Slovenia and Croatia).

¹ We refer to the countries that are not yet part of the European Union, so are excluded, Slovenia and Croatia, which are full rights members in the EU.

² This happened with the 10 countries that joined the European Union in 2004. Supported by a strong political will from the support of 15 member states, their membership was conducted with quick steps once these countries managed to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria.

³ The European Policy on security and defense.

⁴ The European Security and Cooperation policies

The year in which the project was created, was a year of great European enthusiasm: the common European single currency had been circulating for more than one year. At the same time was signed the Treaty of Athens, which ended the pre-accession process of the ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe. These countries joined the great European family in 2004. The aim of this project was that the rest of the Balkan countries would be members with full rights at the 100th anniversary of the start of World War I. We see that the situation appears quite different from what was expected to be achieved, if we try to identify the progress that these countries have made from over the years. Among the priorities of the EU, the enlargement of new countries does not seem to happen, and it is essential to overcome the economic situation. The year 2014, assumed as the “year of great changes in the region”, did not conclude anything but only reduced the hopes of this region citizens.

However, we can not say that the European integration of the Balkan countries has stopped, it is an ongoing process, but a slow one. Croatia is a member with full rights in the EU from July 2013, , Serbia and Albania hold a candidate status, but Macedonia and Montenegro have also begun negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina¹, on February the 16-th of this year filed a formal application for membership in the European Union. This action is considered an important step not only for the region itself but also for Europe, because it marks the possibility of joining the old continent. While Kosovo has signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement and is at the first step toward the European integration, during the last two years, the situation seems to have changed.

For the countries of the Western Balkans, the clear perspective of the EU membership granted by the EU member states is a key stabilizing factor. It supports progress toward the fulfillment of the necessary conditions, including those of the Stabilization and Association Progress².

2. The Relationships between Albania and EU in the First Decade after the Fall of Communism

Immediately after the fall of the tougher regime in communist countries, Tirana, Albania changed its political line by opening to the west. The first contacts with international institutions were with the European Community. In early 1991 the first diplomatic relationships between our country and the EC were created. From that moment on, Albania's integration in the EU appears as the most important priority on the agenda of all the political classes of Albanian.

The first date in this historical process of bilateral relationships development between the EU and Albania dates to May 11, 1992. This date marks the moment when in Brussels, was signed an agreement between the European Economic Community and the Republic of “Albania, about trade exchanges, commercial and economic cooperation³. It is worth pointing out that what impresses on the agreement signed for the first time between the two contracting parties, is its preamble, where specifically stated, “*taking into consideration the political developments, Albania wants to stabilize and consolidate democracy and promote the economic and social progress*”⁴. At this critical stage for a small country such as Albania, a country that had followed a tough policy, getting close to the West was important. This deal revives a thread of hope for Albanian political leaders, but in fact will simply

¹ Bosnia and Herzegovina have signed with the European Union a Stabilization and Association Agreement on 16 June 2008.

² European Commission, *EU Enlargement Strategy 2014-2015*, October 2014, p. 1.

³ The deal was negotiated and signed by the then president of the EEC, also foreign minister of Portugal, João de Deus Pinheiro, Vice-President of the Commission of the European Communities, Frans Andriessen, and the representative of the Albanian Government, Minister of Finance and Economy Genc Ruli.

⁴ Agreement between the Economic European Community and the Republic of Albania, on trade and commercial and economic cooperation, the official Journal of the European Communities, dated 25.11.1992 N.

remain in principle. However by this agreement, it was decided on the development of economic cooperation and expansion of trade relationships with Albania, the establishment on a contractual basis of the political orientation of Albania towards European integration into a functioning democracy and also free market economy.

The relations between our country and the European Union become solid a year later in 1993¹, the year which coincides with the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria for the accession of new countries into the EU, as a cause of major permanent changes that had occurred on Central and Eastern Europe in recent years. It was in this historical moment, happening in Tirana, the European Commission delegation, constituting a permanent diplomatic mission to represent the European Commission in external affairs.

1996 marks the first steps to a contractual agreement with the EU. This new agreement will pave the way for a classic association agreement, but the internal political problems that were highlighted by the contested parliamentary elections of May 1996, together with the deep financial and social crisis, caused by the collapse of the pyramidal schemes, caused the failure of the initiative undertaken from the EU.

In 1997, the General Affairs Council of the EU approved “the Regional Approach to countries of the region”, through which the EU set the political and economic conditions for further development of bilateral relations. The agreement mentioned above, refers to all the Western Balkan countries, part of which is also our country. In Albania, were occurring numerous disturbances, that changed the attitude of many international institutions, one of which, the European Union.

The year 1997 otherwise known as the backward year because of the collapse of “the rental firms”, had reduced the liquidity in the entire country, financially destroying a large number of families, making Albania financially depended to international organizations.

The collapse of pyramidal schemes was the beginning of massive revolts against the government, which was responsible in dual ways: first due to the fact that allowed the creation and operation of these fraudulent companies and second because it interrupted their activity precisely when citizens were expecting to receive higher interests (Fuga, 2008, pp. 334-337). During this period it is noted that the EU’s attitude towards Albania was very distanced.

Why did the EU not activate all the special mechanisms to cope with such a situation? The answers, we think are different; facing to the deteriorating situation, EU was left to the empty promises of the Albanian government, as the initiative containing the activation of a cooperation agreement signed in 1992; but in fact, had contrary attitudes by some members of the state. Therefore, the possibility of the European Union to take a leading role in the “land of the eagles” failed.

The situation had deteriorated, but despite this extremely precarious situation, the EU chose to cooperate in the coordination framework, which was confided to the OSCE mission, therefore it did not choose the leadership role. Brussels was left to organize and initiate the “Alba” mission in the management of the Italian country and also to sustain the initiative in order to create the necessary security conditions for the international aid.

We can state that the EU became aware, when the situation in Kosovo was irreversible. After noticing the escalated situation, this time the European Union needed to take a more significant role, perhaps

¹ Membership criteria, or Copenhagen criteria, were confirmed in December 1995 by the European Council of Madrid, in which they stressed the importance for the establishment of administrative structures in the applicant countries to join the EU. The aim was to create the conditions for a gradual and harmonious integration into the EU.

this was the appropriate time to undertake a regional approach. Realizing also the importance of maintaining a decisive role not only in the European continent, but also towards international actors (Gori, 2007, pp. 36-38).

As mentioned above the EU should assume a more active role in the Balkans, based on this context it must change its strategy, demonstrating with facts and concrete proofs, its ability to extend towards some geographical state that historically belonged to the old continent. Precisely at this moment, in 1998 the relationship between Albania and the European Union was intensified through the creation of a proper legal framework and administrative capacity. While, in 1999 a year later, at the end of July, in Sarajevo a new initiative was launched, taken by the European Union for the entire Western Balkans, the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

This process in the entire Western Balkans, would be conditioned by the desire and the will of the political forces, therefore the assessment of each of these states was done individually, a fact which proves that some of them have made significant strides, while others have still a long way to go. We can say that our country is in a very important moment, it must fulfill all the necessary criteria to make the membership request.

3. The Relationships between the EU and Albania after the Signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement

A new and important page in the relationship between the European Union and Albania, was signed on November 24, 2000 during the Zagreb Summit. During this summit, the EU offered to the Balkan countries the perspective of a future membership in the large European family, once the Copenhagen criteria was fulfilled and they agreed about the assistance programs to help achieve these objectives. In the meantime, these countries pledged to respect the conditions set by the European Union and to use the Stabilization and Association Agreement to prepare for their route to EU¹.

The negotiations for the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Albania were officially opened in 2003, but due to problems of various nature, the signing of this agreement was made possible, on June 12, 2006, and entered into force in 2009. This historical and important moment for our country, marked the transition toward a new stage, the relations between Albania and the European Union advanced further. The NATO membership, another important issue for our country, happened in 2009.

During this period, it is worth mentioning the government program for the 2005-2009 period, where it can be evidenced the intention to undertake reforms, this as a result of the commitments provided by the SAA. Among the basic goals stand out the reforms for the development and consolidation of the democratic state, the restoration of the rule of law and the eradication of the corruption system, which will be designed and implemented in order to adapt to the European models and to get European standards. The Government Programme 2005-2009 refers to the previous government (under the leadership of the Socialist Party), calling it the major slowdown in the European path. According to the government of the time, during the socialist government, have occurred phenomena which have helped turn Albania in a catastrophic politically and economically state, as *“the creation of the corruption system, the violation of free elections and the implementation of unilateral reforms have negatively impacted the Albanian citizens, making it possible to lose confidence in state institutions, which are inefficient, opaque and deeply corrupt”*.

¹ The final decision of the Zagreb Summit.

Compared with regional counterparts, who after the 90's, in particular in the last decade have made significant progress into the European integration process, in the Albania's case, the results have been relatively minor. However, after the accession to NATO in 2009, the country is oriented towards the integration into the Euro-Atlantic area. Albania has achieved one of the two most important strategic goals with her membership in NATO in 2009. EU integration is another strategic goal of Albania.

"EU membership" is the slogan that has characterized all the political programs of the governments of our country after the fall of the dictatorial regime, it has also been the main motto of the campaigns and public debates. Despite the political and social demonstrations, the main actors in Albania are at a constant state of "war", attacking each others with rigged election results and holding back the necessary reforms for the European integration.

Once the SAA entered into force on April 1st 2009, Albania at the end of the same month officially presented the request for membership. EU officially accepted the application in November 2009, and in the next month submitted to Albania the questionnaire about its willingness for membership.

However one of the main conditions for Albania's EU integration is the implementation of the Stabilization and Association Agreement. We find the legal basis of the mutual interaction between the contracting parties in one of the provisions of the TEU, Article 217, that specifically states: "*The European Union may conclude with one or more third countries or international organizations, to establish an association agreement, which includes the mutual rights and obligations ...* After the entry into force of the SAA, Albania has tried to respect all obligations required by the EU, although often various problems have appeared inside the country, Albania has made progress in its journey toward Europe. Referred to the above mentioned, officially since 2010, Albanian citizens have the opportunity to travel without visas in the Schengen area, as a result of the completion and fulfillment of a number of criteria by the Government.

Referred to the implementation and putting into practice the legal obligations deriving from this agreement, the Government has taken the necessary legal measures, at the same time one of the key priorities of our country, respecting the remaining recommendations after receiving candidate status¹. Recently, on June 24, 2014, Albania has received the candidate status after a series of failed attempts.

During these years, there has been progress, but these changes have been due to impositions by the EU representatives, while the Albanian political elite have hampered this process, due to a lack of political dialogue between the political forces. However the journey of our country by itself presents a number of problems that must be resolved, to upgrade to a new stage, an application for membership.

According to the Report Progress for Albania in 2015, changes have been made in all the aspects, however there are still some that have a long way to go. For this reason Albania continued to actively participate in high level dialogue meetings, as well as in the related joint working groups on the five key priorities². Continuously Albania must fulfill the five key criteria for the opening of the accession negotiations, therefore our country is a big step closer to the European family, but the whole process still seems more complicated than it had been expected.

¹ Decision of the Council of Ministers no. 486, dated 25.07.2012 on the adoption of the National Plan for the Implementation of the SAA, and the definition of institutional responsibilities for aligning Albanian legislation of any act of the European Union (which is updated annually).

² European Commission, *Albania 2015 Report*, November 2015, pg. 4.

4. Conclusion

In 1997 the situation had deteriorated, but despite this extremely precarious situation, the EU chose to cooperate in the framework of coordination, which was confided to the OSCE mission, therefore it did not choose the leadership role.

The European Union should assume a more active role in the Balkans, it must change its strategy, demonstrating with facts and concrete proofs, its ability to extend towards some geographical states that historically belonged to the old continent.

During 1998 the relationship between Albania and the European Union was intensified through the creation of a proper legal framework and administrative building capacity. In 1999 a year later, at the end of July, in Sarajevo was launched a new initiative taken by the European Union for the entire Western Balkans, the Stabilization and Association Agreement.

A new important moment in the relationships between the European Union and Albania, was on November 24, 2000 during the Zagreb Summit. During this summit, the EU offered to Balkan countries the perspective for future membership in the large European family, with the fulfillment of the Copenhagen criteria and the agreement for assistance programs to achieve these objectives. The negotiations for the signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with Albania were officially opened in 2004, but entered into force on April 1st 2009. During these years, there has been progress, but these changes have been due to impositions by the EU representatives, while the Albanian political elite have hampered this process, due to a lack of political dialogue between the political forces.

Recently, on June 24, 2014, Albania has received the candidate status after a series of failed attempts. In the past years, Albania has smoothly implemented its obligations under the Stabilization and Association Agreement. Actually, our country is a big step closer to the European family, but the whole process still seems more complicated than it had been expected. Albania continued to actively participate in high level dialogue meetings, as well as the related joint working groups on the five key criteria.

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