

ALBANIA AND EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

As in many other nations where communist ideology has been supplanted by democratic principles, in Albania also the process leading to Euro-Atlantic integration "has become a symbol of one of the fundamental targets of its national policy." Although there exists a political will and desire to achieve integration, in reality 'Albanian official policy has been both unable and unwilling to make real efforts for this integration.' A second major obstacle to EU and NATO integration is the presence of organized crime and corruption "and their joint activities with Albanian high officials." Starova points to the need for the international community's support in aiding Albanian institutions to overcome the various hurdles to Euro-Atlantic integration. The war against corruption which has become "a chronic disease of the community" must become a top priority with the ruling government. In order to ensure that the war against corruption is swift and effective, it is necessary to build and expand state institutions which can successfully lead to "the independence of the judiciary from politics, respect for political freedom, a free media and political opposition." As the economy is in ruins as the result of problems inherited from the communist period and Albanian isolation, Starova proposes a Marshall plan which would encompass the entire Balkan region. Entry into NATO requires a modern army complying with NATO standards, which requires both money and an educated officer corps. Albania's entry into NATO is therefore not imminent.

With the democratic changes and the establishment of a free market economy in Albania, the phrase "Euro-Atlantic Integration" has become a realistic, strategic objective of Albanian political parties and the majority of the public. During the last decade, "Euro-Atlantic Integration" was considered the magic formula that would change

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Albania back into a Western country, fulfilling an old dream of its citizens. During the 1990s, Albanians naively believed that membership to the European Union and NATO was obtainable simply by wishing it were so.

Even after a decade of failed attempts to integrate Albania into Euro-Atlantic organizations, the subject still occupies the Albanian media. The truth is that Albania has been unable and unwilling to make solid efforts for integration. It has failed to fulfill the criteria for Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet references to EU and NATO integration, news, and enthusiastic endorsements have flooded the media and official political speeches, like money during a financial inflation, even though Macedonia signed the association agreement with the EU before Albania. "Politics" is certainly an impediment. But the most insidious hindrance is the connection between Albanian high officials and the mafia and the attendant corruption.

Even in a best-case scenario, quite clear is the fact that Albania must labor just to prepare for the integration processes; it will need special assistance if it is to meet the criteria for membership to the EU and NATO.

What are the main challenges facing Albania in its quest for Euro-Atlantic integration? First, membership to the EU and NATO is a chimera without radical reform of Albania's state institutions and their operations. Corruption must be eradicated without compromise or accommodation.

In addition to the debilitating effect of corruption on state institutions, other serious problem areas include the independence of the judiciary from politics; respect for political freedom; a free media and political opposition; implementing the "transparency principle" in institutional decision-making; and excluding political orientation as the criterion for employment in the state administration.

A second challenge is the economy

I do not agree that the Albanian economy must satisfy the criteria for EU accession before becoming a NATO or EU member. It would mean postponing indefinitely Albania's membership in these organizations. This is true for any country aspiring to integration. Instead, Albania and other countries should be integrated following a different, accelerated track; for example, a Marshall plan for the Balkans. If not that, then an expansive effort to stimulate the economy and economic reform.

The negative effects of high unemployment and other serious economic problems dissuade foreign investors. High employment and an active economy promote prosperity and are positive indicators that the Albanian people are ready for Euro-Atlantic

integration. But outside investment is needed to spark an economic and cultural renaissance.

Another challenge to Albania is establishing and stabilizing public order and security; this is not just an Albanian interest. Order and security also intimately concern the community of nations that Albania hopes to join. But for Albania to achieve public order and security, it needs help from the international community in neutralizing and eliminating Albania's regional mafia organizations. For the mafia is "in bed" with politics; only major surgery can eradicate its activities (drugs, prostitution, illegal refugees, etc.).

Question: Albania has been listed and its government linked to assorted illegal activities. Why isn't this activity publicly aired? Why aren't the perpetrators exposed, prosecuted, or indicted by The Hague?

Apart from these questions, crime is and will remain a frontline issue for Albania. Any solution requires a civil and political consensus to pursue, expose, and prosecute the participants and stop illegal traffic. Public order and security as a part of regional security and for Euro-Atlantic integration are Albania's expressed goals,

Another challenge is establishing a military that meets NATO standards. Our discussion so far has laid bare Albania's internal conflicts and problems. Albania cannot add to them the burden of creating a modern military force without massive international assistance.

The last challenge concerns spiritual values and national identity. Albania now shelters and tolerates a diversity of religious faiths and communities. Mutual respect and tolerance for diversity must be the guide when questions arise concerning ethnicity, cultural differences, and religious values. Albanians must also be concerned about maintaining their cultural identity. Adjunct to this would be a new, added goal for the education of youth: that is, giving them a map for a new territory - their new Euro-Atlantic home.

These are some of the challenges Albania must overcome before it becomes a member of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Apart from these, for the region and Albania as well, a concept of a speedy Euro-Atlantic integration should be applied, following up a concrete assistance from the Euro-Atlantic community, in order to afford successfully the mentioned challenges.