Albania on the Verge of a New Era
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Albania, a small country situated along the coast of the Adriatic and Ionian Seas, used to be known merely for its geographical existence and not for its modern history. Fifty years of communist dictatorship left Albania lying in the farthest depths of European memory, even though it formed part of the European body. The Albanians, one of the most ancient populations in Europe, have a history full of love of freedom and democratic aspirations; the communist era was like a foreign body that has now been removed from the history of Albania, which reaches back to hundreds of years BC.

Albania in a Nutshell

The Republic of Albania covers an area of 28,748 square kilometres and has a population of 3 million. The language spoken is Albanian, which differs from any language spoken in the Balkan region or elsewhere. There are over 3 million ethnic Albanians living in Kosovo and thousands around the border of Montenegro and the former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia. The religion was originally Christian but during the Ottoman occupation many Albanians living in the Ottoman territories became Muslims for political or economic reasons. By the end of the World War II, the population's religious beliefs were further divided: the Roman Catholic faith prevailed in the highlands to the north of the country, the Muslim faith in the northeast and centre, and the people in the south mainly belonged to the Orthodox Church. The communist regime closed down all the religious institutions: churches were pulled down, religious officials were forbidden to exercise their duties, religious propaganda was made illegal and many people were put in jail for this very reason. In 1990 there was a widespread movement throughout the country, demanding the legalization of religion. A large mass, attended by 5000 Catholics, took place in Shkodra (the second largest town in Albania). Pressure from within the country, as well as the visit from the former UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, and the subsequent visit from Mother Theresa, the ethnic Albanian Peace Prize Winner (born in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as Gonxhe Bojaxhi), led to the lifting of the ban on organized religion. Complete freedom with respect to religious belief was granted by the democratic government, formed after the free elections of 22 March 1992. These elections signalled the victory of the Democratic Party over the Socialist Party (the former communists). The doors of Albania were finally opened towards Europe, and Europe in turn is opening its welcoming doors towards Albania. Albania is currently a member of the UN, CSCE, and has been persistent in its efforts to become a member of the Council of Europe and subsequently accede to the European Community. In May 1992, the Albanian Prime Minister, Mr Alexander Mexi, signed the Economic and Trade Agreement with EC, signifying a further step forward and opening the way towards more advanced agreements.

Albania and EC Support

The Albanian Government is obtaining full support from Europe in all fields: diplomatic, economic, financial, cultural, etc. Many distinguished senior public figures have recently visited Albania. The President of the Council of Europe Assembly, Mr Martinez, came to Albania and gave a speech in the Parliament reflecting positively on the recent developments in the country. During their visits, the Italian President, Mr Scalfaro; in his capacity as Vice-Chairman of the Council of Europe, Mr Andriessen; the British Foreign Minister, Mr Hurd; and the Secretary-General of NATO, Mr Wörner, all judged the measures taken by the Democratic Government as being correct and fruitful.

The EC has also provided considerable assistance through its TEMPUS and PHARE programmes. PHARE has been involved from the beginning of the reform process, particularly
in formulating privatization and restructuring strategies and helping establish the legal framework, accounting system and company screening required by the privatization process. TEMPUS has been operating in the education sector which plays a very important role in the democratization process. There are three main reasons for this: firstly, the education system will provide teaching on a revised methodological basis with new content, in particular in the field of social sciences; secondly, many people who have already graduated some years previously are being confronted with new rules of the economy, advanced technologies, etc., and require complementary education; thirdly, the restructuring of the economy will create new jobs which will demand new skills, while making some of the existing ones useless, and it is the duty of the education system to carry out the training process. The education system will help to fulfil the aims of reforming the government; to bring about this reform, it is evident that the gaps in the public managerial skills at the central and local government levels have to be filled. These gaps can be attributed to the fact that the new government needs new administrative competence. A solution to this problem would be to provide training for civil servants through specialized European centres of public administration.

There have been important developments in the field of economic and financial cooperation. For instance, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development recently approved a strategy for Albania which will make it possible to identify suitable investment projects in all economic sectors, especially in the financial sector, agriculture, mining and tourism. The Swiss Confederation will grant Albania 9.5 million Swiss francs which will be used to set up a telephone network of 30,000 lines. Furthermore, the World Bank has granted US$ 18 million for the reconstruction of the main national roads in Albania. A new bank has been founded, the Albanian-Italian Bank, which is the first financial organization of this type.

Albania has received tremendous support through aid; this has been in the form of pharmaceutical products, electrical equipment, construction materials, metal, steel tubing, telecommunication facilities, wheat, flour, sugar, rice, and so on. The EC has started to put into practice a broad programme for bringing raw materials and spare parts to some 30 selected enterprises in order to boost industrial production and provide continued employment for the workers.

The process of the democratic reform in Albania is a very long and large-scale one. The first results are now emerging from the 12 months of democracy in Albania. I would like to specify only two aspects of what has been achieved so far: firstly, the spiritual, ideological and religious freedom, and secondly, the right of being a private owner (the peasants who constitute more than 70% of the population may, finally, own their own land and livestock), both forbidden throughout the 50 years of dictatorship.

There is still much to be done; the social and economic repercussions will tell how real the democratic freedoms are and the first impacts, albeit rather modest, are quite impressive. This is just the beginning; the future is controlled by the relative speed at which the democratization process is implemented; the faster it is, the sooner Albania will become a worthy member of the European Community.

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