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Albanian FM Ditmir Bushati: 'Those still thinking about a Greater Albania live in a different world'

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*The Foreign Minister of Albania Ditmir Bushati gives his views on a number of topical issues the EU-aspiring state needs to deal with. The interview was conducted by LSEE's **Dimitar Bechev** and **Tena Prelec**.*



CORRUPTION

Top politicians and army generals can also be brought to justice.

The recent [EU progress report](#) highlighted corruption in Albania as a major problem. What are the main measures the government plans to introduce going forward to tackle this?

You know the famous Nokia advertisement, 'Nokia connecting people'? The same could be said for corruption. It is a widely shared phenomenon, and EU states are not immune to it either.

It is not the first time that corruption is emerging as an issue that needs to be addressed thoroughly, even though we are not the only country ridden by this problem. Having said that, I am not advocating here that we should not fight corruption and that we should seek a discount ticket on the way on how the EU should assess countries in the region.

There are certain instruments available to candidate countries, namely the benchmarks and EU acquis standards in Chapters 23 and 24 (*Judiciary and fundamental rights and Justice, freedom and security, e.n.*). We have seen that the new approach taken by the EU in the case of Croatia is being more productive also for other countries, like Montenegro – which now feels the heat. The same holds true for Albania. We are working hard, with expertise provided by the European Commission, and anti-corruption is one of the five key benchmarks for the opening of the accession talks. It is true that the problem is still persistent, but it is also true that the progress report acknowledges the government's political determination to fight organised crime and corruption.

The story of a [Central Bank of Albania employee who stole money from the vaults](#) has been the cause of some amazement and amusement. Do you think a radical change in mentality is needed? If yes, how do you get there?

It is a very delicate situation, but it is important to work on three fronts: first, to ensure a solid track record of punishments for corruption; second, on pre-emptive measures and pre-emptive mechanisms; third, that we ensure a clear distinction between the executive, the legislative and the judicial branches of the state. There are people who are rightly fed up with corruption and mismanagement of power and they would like to see people go behind the bars. At the same time, we should ensure due process of law for all these people.

In the episode you were referring to, the Central Bank governor was ousted from his position and put to trial.

As we have seen in the case of Croatia, a prime example in the region, top politicians and army generals can also be brought to justice.

SERBIA

We need to use the EU accession process as a common denominator for normalising relations and resolving pending issues. I hope Vucic is as modest as he appeared at the LSE.

What is your interpretation of the events that took place in the stadium during the [football match](#) between Serbia and Albania in Belgrade?

There are several interpretations. I will start with the cynical one: due to this dispute, [UEFA got €200,000](#) by fining both national teams.

There is also another explanation, that tells us that peace and stability in our region cannot be taken for granted. It is true, on one hand, that Bosnia is at peace, but it seems that below the surface there is a very recent history, and we need to nurture the current peace with concrete projects. We have to work for a new narrative, which will be a narrative that is very much linked with the economic development of the region. It is still easier to go from Tirana to Vienna or Istanbul, rather than to Skopje or Belgrade. I believe this is an additional factor that shows that relations between Albania and Serbia need to be normalised.

We need to use the EU accession process as a common denominator and factor for normalising relations and resolving pending issues. There are some differences (we are a NATO member state while Serbia is denying any formal attachment; we are involved in the Trans-Ionian pipeline, Serbia is not; we are part of Mediterranean initiatives, Serbia is not), but on the other hand there are a lot of similarities: Serbia and Albania are both EU candidate countries, and we see the normalisation of our relations as key for democratic stability, in the region and also in the advancement of the EU integration process.

What is the single most important measure you would like to see from the Vucic government in order to improve relations between Albania and Serbia?

First of all, I expect a normal visit next Monday. This will be the first meeting ever of the two Prime Ministers, and is therefore a very welcome development. There is a new geopolitical context in the region; we are determined to open a new chapter in our relations with Serbia and to address these pending issues one by one. I thus expect a normal visit and also the same sense of realism coming from Serbia. I followed [Mr Vucic's talk here at the LSE](#), and I hope he is as modest as he appeared here.

Clearly after the events in Serbia there was a surge in nationalism on both sides. This was very evident on social media. What is your government doing to keep a lid on such sentiments in Albania?

First I would like to make a clarification on the nationalistic sentiments. We know very well what has been the history of our region. It is, I believe, very important to make a clear distinction between ordinary citizens and high officials. You will not find a single statement coming from Albanian dignitaries that is against Serbia, that blames the Serbian nation. Unfortunately, if I refer to the statements of the President of Serbia (*Tomislav Nikolić, e.n.*), there is blame on Albanians as a nation and a blame on Albania as a state.

However, we should move forward and look at projects of mutual importance. An important step forward would be signing agreement on the mutual recognition of diplomas and establishing a Youth centre for Albanian-Serbian relations, a proposal that was widely discussed in a conference in Berlin this August. In short, we need to open up perspectives for the new generations and avoid relying on Brussels as the only hub where decisions are taken.

KOSOVO

Those who are still thinking about a Greater Albania are living in a different world from today's reality.

Albania-Kosovo relations: are the recent joint meetings between the two governments a prelude to political unification?

Statistics show that Serbia and Kosovo trade more with one another than Kosovo and Albania. Those who are still thinking about a Greater Albania are living in a different world from today's reality.

We signed a strategic partnership agreement with Kosovo this year; in it, there are also clear provisions about the borders of the two countries. Our main project is the EU accession. It is also so for Kosovo.



Ditmir Bushati, Foreign Minister of Albania, speaking to LSEE's Dimitar Bechev and Tena Prelec

EUROPEAN UNION

There is no alternative for us – and, I believe, for the entire region – to EU membership.

The EU has been in crisis for the past few years. Why is Albania still committed to this path, and pushing hard?

I think that in the case of the Balkans, where we lack solid democratic traditions in terms of state-building, the EU accession process is seen through the lens of a transformative agenda, an agenda of democratisation. In a nutshell, EU accession is an incentive for improving the democratic credentials of a country. There is no alternative for us – and, I believe, for the entire region – to EU membership. You will not find a single government that is not trying to join the EU, despite difficulties and despite the fact that this process is tougher than it used to be when Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia joined.

The same holds true in economic terms. Let's be honest: we see the process also as an instrument for social and economic development. We know very well that the region is not yet on par with the EU average and believe that transformation cannot take place without the economic support of the EU. There is a paradox: the EU is much more popular in the aspiring countries than in the current member states. It is much more popular in the Eastern part than in the Western part. Gallup polls confirm that.

What is your opinion about the newly-formed European Commission? How do you see the new characters in Brussels, since you will be doing business with them?

In our view, we have a more political college of Commissioners than before.

The official documents issued by Juncker so far show that there will be more inter-relation and interaction among the Commissioners. For instance, Federica Mogherini will be driving foreign policy in Brussels, but she will also be responsible for enlargement in its political aspects. We would like to see this as a sign that there will be more cohesion between the Commission and Member States when dealing with foreign countries and countries aspiring for EU membership.

Federica Mogherini comes from Italy, a country with a strong say in the Mediterranean, and it is a country that has been advocating the Balkans' EU accession. Also, I hope and I believe that commissioner Johannes Hahn will consolidate the projects in relation to connectivity launched by Štefan Füle and to macro-regional strategies – because we have been working with him on the Ionian and Adriatic macro-region.

Frans Timmermans is a great personality, one of the brightest foreign ministers sitting at the NATO table. I know him from the past. He is a very experienced, gifted foreign policy practitioner; he is going to have a very strong portfolio.

We should however not forget that this Commission is working under the assumption that there will be no further enlargement in the next five years. In a way, it will have its own limitations in relation to this process that is of key interest to Albania.

NATO

The crisis in Ukraine created dividing lines in the Balkans. We are one of the very few countries that fully aligned with the EU; there are other countries which clearly are not.

Albania is a NATO member. Were you happy with the outcome of the recent NATO summit in Wales? What is on Albania's shopping list?

I have to be realistic: we are a small country, although we are currently the only NATO member in the Western Balkans. Our main interest is to foster an "open-doors" policy. Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia have all applied for NATO membership. We are happy to see that Montenegro is on a highway now. On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that the accession processes of Macedonia and Bosnia have either stalled or are not making much progress.

When it comes to the threats that Europe is facing in the West: the crisis in Ukraine created dividing lines in the Balkans. We are one of the very few countries that fully aligned with the EU; there are other countries which clearly are not.

NATO accession needs to be seen through a geopolitical lens. Geographically speaking, from Istanbul to Lisbon there are still a few security gaps that need to be addressed and the engagement with the countries in the region is a must.

Also the case of Georgia is telling: there was once a promise but it seems now that there is no longer much appetite to give Georgia membership.

To what extent do the prospects of other big players being involved in the region constitute a threat, and to what extent an opportunity? How do you see the multiplicity of actors involved in the region? Russia, China, Turkey.

It is true that there is a multiplicity of actors in the region. There is obviously Russia. Turkey is also present, both politically and economically.

The Chinese outreach initiative seems to be well structured and in my view it is not perceived as a threat to Central and East European countries, but this needs to be combined with the countries' aspirations for EU membership.

There is a growing presence of Gulf countries. For the moment it seems that this presence is strictly about business.

In some cases these actors are more flexible and effective, as they have a more cohesive vertical structure than the EU and are not consensus-driven.

"DOUBLE LANGUAGE"

We live in a digitalised world, and it is very difficult to create this 'double language' society. I do not see two agendas.

The Albanian intellectual Fatos Lubonja was recently a guest at LSEE. While praising the Rama government as having a more open-minded approach and being more in line with 'European values', [Lubonja told us that](#): "there is always a contradiction between the democratic façade and the real work of the institutions in the country, which are very often captured by organised crime. This has created a double language among Albanian politicians: one language for internationals speaking about Europe, and one language for inside the country, a mixture of nationalistic rhetoric plus of course the struggle for power." How do you respond to this?

It is very difficult to comment on Fatos Lubonja. I really appreciate his contribution to society, but I would respectfully disagree with this stance. We live in a digitalised world, and it is very difficult to create this 'double language' society. Albania being granted candidate status is not only about the EU's generosity, but it is also because of the reform process that has taken place in the country. Yes I think we need to communicate more with the Albanian public about European values, but I really do not see two agendas in the country.

Ditimir Bushati recently gave a talk at the LSE entitled "Long standing stability in South East Europe – from security to economic growth", whose details you can access [at this link](#).

Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of LSEE Research on SEE, nor of the London School of Economics.

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