

Geopolitics of Albania in the Balkans after NATO Membership

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is a brief analysis of Albanian geopolitics after NATO membership. We are still a developing country with different social as well as political problems, we are paving the way for the consolidation of a solid asset of Albanian society where state institutions operate safely and transparently, while providing security and stability to Albanian society as a whole. Diplomatic relations with our neighbors were completely vague course during these years also because of the political system in power before the 90s as well as after the collapse of the communist regime, the Albanian transition has not facilitated a consolidation of relations in the region. NATO membership was a crucial change for Albania, for the situation in the country but above all for the positioning of Albania in the region and beyond. But what steps are taken and what is to be improved to have a dignified representation in the international arena of the Albanian state and what initiatives should be undertaken to give our contribution in maintaining peace and stability in the region .

Keywords: Geopolitics, the Balkans, NATO, Democracy

Geopolitics, this concept or scientific discipline does not hold an accurate and generic definition because even the other concept "politic" does not hold a generic definition either. The geopolitics of Albania continues to suffer the consequences of many ongoing conflicts affecting the Balkan Peninsula, especially those related to the Albanian population living in ex-Yugoslavia territory. Although Kosovo is an independent country by all means, ethnic conflicts and turbulences become active time after time because of different problematics, but always in the core stand the ethnic conflict.

Albania received officially last year, after the unanimous approval of all 28 member countries governments, the candidate member country status to European Council. A step further towards full membership, although symbolic this step will give to Albania the possibility to profit from before-membership instruments such as IAP structural funds allocated to support regional, rural development as well as human resources. Albania will have access to joint-financial investments of European Bank of Investment and other International Financial Institutions.

Rama Government successfully reached part of the tasks assigned by European Commission; the other part of the "job" was done by the Commission itself. Apparently Albania occupies a very special part in the Commission agenda of strategic plans for Balkan. In 2010 the internal turmoil, because of extreme polarization of the political system in Albania, led the member countries to refuse the request to receive the candidate member status, followed by two other "No-s" in the end of 2013. The 2012 Reforms, the peaceful and calm elections of 2013, the further progress in reforming the juridical system and the implementation of anti-corruption norms by Rama government were the final evidences that convinced the Commission to take a step further and officially accept the candidate status.

For the first time the Commission position reflex a new strategic attitude for Albania, especially in the focus of European election on energy politics issues. It is very obvious that Brussels clearly supports and favors the TAP project TAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline) instead of South Stream project, lying 210 km of its pipeline in the Albanian territory (or 25% of its total pipeline length). Furthermore, the main storage gas deposit, which will be used to regulate Europe supply with gas will be constructed in Albania, demonstrating thus the confidence that EU has placed on country's stability. Russian gas boycott has placed Albania in a strategic position in European energy distribution system, but this will have serious economic consequences.

Oxford Economics reports have made a positive evaluation on the effect that TAP will have for the Albanian economy, a direct and indirect contribution of 106 million euro in the GDP for the period 2015-18, and the opening of at least 4000 vacancies. On the other hand the European offices have never tried to hide their interest to have, in the future, an economically strong Albania, considering the strategic position in relation with Eastern European countries, and unused country's potentials. Port of Shëngjin, one of the deepest in Mediterranean Sea in the near future can become one of the most important maritime-commercial gate, potentially one of the most important in Europe.

It is understandable that the road to an eventual membership in UE is still long and inevitably it carries the burden of resolving continuous political and economic issues in the country. Furthermore, our historic adversaries still really doubt on the possibility that Albania has to reach the European standards. Traditional adversaries of Albania membership have always underlined the fact that Albania is a country of Muslim majority (Opposite of secular France) and is one of the poorest countries in Europe (the opposition of North Countries led by Holland). Czech Republic has warned to use Veto in giving the candidate member status because of legal disputes with CEZ (a company controlled by Czech government), which became part of the energy distribution market in Albania in 2009 and had its license revoked by Albanian Government in January 2013.

Berlin Conference brought new inputs to the recent European developments in the economic aspect because it considers Balkan not only a security issue, but for the first time, a necessary expansion and very important to European market. In the mean time, the government goal is a new approach to the region and towards the regional countries on their way to integration, in order to make possible a new relationship era between EU and Balkan. It is of specific importance the new policy implemented in region in supporting peace for the simple fact that this is the first year without any apparent conflict in the borders of Balkan countries. Without any doubt this is the right foundation to build the new relations focusing on the increase of the financial investments for the region.

It is obvious that the financial crises has affected the region in general, and the financial resources have been placed in function of overcoming the crisis and in the management of the economy deprived of strong alternative resources. Given this it is hard to imagine a stable progress in the coming decade. This means that the region will be left outside European development road. On the other hand this means that the road to full membership in the EU for all regional countries becomes even harder, not considering here the negative effect that internal contra-reaction might have, in the region generally, because of the long-drawn-out integration process, dictated by the current situation of the European Union today.

One of the main pillars of the regional collaboration should be the regional infrastructure, for the development of which countries such as Kosovo, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia have come together in supporting a major project such as "Blue Corridor", which will connect south Croatia, Montenegro and Albania with what is called the Mediterranean tourism ring, but is assures as well a strategic path for intensive exchange, not only for people, but commodities as well, to assure a stable economical progress.

Secondly, regional rail infrastructure has a special importance not only for the region but for Europe too.

Third, logistic parks or centers and multimodal ports.

Forth, a strong encouragement to diminish the difference between the region and the rest of Europe in the view of digital technology and access in the technology of regional companies.

The second pillar is the energy, energetic provision and its infrastructure. When it comes to these issues we are considered to be in a better position because of being included in TAP project. Still it is of major importance to encourage more investment in this field, which will assure the interconnection of the region and EU into an integrated network of energy, which without any doubt would have a strong influence on the energetic stability in the whole continent.

At last, tourism as a very important service sector and of strategic importance for the economy of the most part of region is another important pillar for the future of this region which assures employment and stable economic prosperity.

Currently Europe is facing two threats, one coming from East and one coming from the south border. The need to find different energy sources was a reality Europe confronted with during the Ukraine crisis and now with the Middle East crises, in this picture Albania and all the region occupies a key position for the fact that Albania is the country where two major geo-strategic projects TAP and IAP will be connected.

The geo-politic situation of Albania is very favorable because of the above mentioned projects, but this gives to Albania important responsibilities in the eyes of all the other international actors not only regional.

Albanians play an important role in keeping and safeguarding peace in the Balkan, as shown with the Kosovo independence. The Albanians play an important role in Macedonia and Montenegro in building and consolidating a multi-ethnic state. The economic factor is very important in a country's life not only for the people's welfare but also for the country's prestige in the relations with the regional countries.

There are many different problematic issues in the Albanian life and most of them should be met as they are conditions to be met in order become member of UE. Freedom of speech in the media, the emergency to fight corruption and reinforcement of the legal power by making it more efficient and independent.

The standards to be met for the UE integration have been outlined for each country aiming full membership and in the case of Albania assuring the values and democratic standards in the start point, meanwhile fighting corruption, empowering the decision-making institutions, the consolidation of the juridical system by giving more independence and

increasing its effectiveness as well as the improvement of health system are the key words for a radical change in the system and the integration in EU.

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