

Joint Centre for Albania – Serbia Relations

Albania and Serbia towards a common future in the European Union

In October 2014 a drone with Albanian nationalistic and patriotic symbols flying over the Partizan stadium in Belgrade in the midst of a Serbia-Albania Euro 2016 qualifier put Albania-Serbia relations into a Cold War status quo. One month later, Prime Minister Edi Rama paid a historic visit to Serbia, the first by an Albanian Prime Minister in 68 years, in a tense climate following the drone incident, but paving the way to the normalization of relations between the two countries which are considered key players for the region's security, economic development and the Western Balkan's European integration.

While relations between the two countries have taken a U-turn, with meetings between Prime Ministers Rama and Vucic now almost quite frequent and normal, the civil society is also playing a key role in the normalization of relations through a bottom-up approach. A two-day forum in Durres last weekend brought together civil society representatives from both Serbia and Albania in a new effort to identify concrete cooperation opportunities that would normalize relations between the two countries which have remained difficult since the late 1940s when communist Albania and then-Yugoslavia ended their relationship as key allies.

The Durres forum was held as part of the Joint Centre for Albanian-Serbia Relations, an initiative by the Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) and the European Movement Serbia. AIIS executive director Albert Rakipi said it is time relations between the two countries are pushed forward by themselves with no foreign mediator and that the Franco-German model of reconciliation should serve as a reference point. "It is a fact that initiatives on the normalization and strengthening of Albania-Serbia relations came from outside our countries. Three years ago, there was an initiative by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for trilateral meetings of senior officials as well as the Berlin Process which involved relations between Tirana and Belgrade. Of course these have been and continue being fruitful and crucial.

The third party mediation is a widespread practice in international relations. But we think and strongly believe that it is now high time for local initiatives, which means between Albanians and Serbians themselves to strengthen relations," said Rakipi. "Proposals coming internally are more efficient. This is how it worked in the Franco-

German relations, it is a model for the normalization and strengthening of relations which still remains current. The Franco-German model in addressing barriers and problems remains a reference point and inspiration in our strategic project for the Joint Centre of Albania-Serbia relations,” he added.

Jelica Minic, a former diplomat who heads the European Movement Serbia is optimistic about future Serbia-Albania relations after positive messages conveyed by both Prime Ministers Rama and Vucic. “Civil society contacts are at advanced stage. This forum is promoting this. There is obvious progress even in the business sector. Political support is being reflected in the official communication between chambers of commerce from both countries. Monthly meetings and forums on sectoral topics with interest to the business community pave the way for exchange of potentials and investments.

The synchronization with regional and global organizations is also an effort to attract important foreign investors. On the other hand, the Berlin Process, under the auspices of German Chancellor Merkel, projects in energy and infrastructure support the re-invigoration of exchanges, the strengthening of tourism industry, the free movement of people,” Minic told Deutsche Welle in the local Albanian service. German scholar Franz-Lothar Altmann, who moderated the entire Durres Forum sessions on EU integration, politics, economy, youth and culture and the media, said the interactive Durres Forum, was proof that the normalization of relations is on track.

“No topic can be untouchable, even when stances are extreme. Judgment cannot come closer and no compromise can be reached if ideas and alternatives are not introduced, if you are not patient in comparing the arguments and effects this or that solution or approach has. The Durres Forum fulfilled this standard, as a proof that further steps in the project will be on the right track,” said Altmann, a professor of intercultural and international relations at the University of Bucharest. German Ambassador to Albania Hellmut Hoffmann said that EU has a strong interest to stabilize the region and Albania-Serbia relations are of great importance.

“It is no secret that Albania-Serbia relations have been difficult for decades. That’s why we welcome the creation of this joint centre which will help advance cooperation,” said Hoffmann whose government is financially supporting the project along with the Norwegian government. “The region has made steps forward but as

the English say it is not out of the woods yet,” added the Ambassador. Parliament Speaker Ilir Meta said that the past still holds Serbia-Albania relations back but the way both countries see future relations has positively changed compared to two decades ago. “It is now 16 years since Miloshevic left and Serbia entered a new stage, but we are not yet where we would like to be because we are still held hostage by the past and behavior typical of the Cold War. However, we now see the future differently from 25 years ago.

Relations between Albania and Serbia play a big role because they are not simply relations between Albania and Serbia but broader relations reflected between Albanians and Serbs in the region and Albanians and Slavs,” said Meta. Kosovo, which gained independence from Serbia in 2008, has been a tough issue in Albania-Serbia relations but the predominantly ethnic Albanian country now recognized by 112 countries and aspiring EU integration is normalizing relations with Serbia and is no longer seen as a barrier in Serbia-Albania cooperation.

Civil society representatives suggested that regional countries have to strengthen cooperation and overcome barriers and stereotypes as the Western Balkans remains fragile and “whatever happens in one country affects the other” creating a bad image which could hamper EU integration efforts and much-needed foreign investments in a region which is relatively poor and suffers high unemployment rates. A plurality of residents of Albania believe relations between this country and Serbia are normal and likely to improve in the future and such improvements are in the best interest of both countries, according to a national survey released by the Albanian Institute for International Studies in late 2015.

“The findings of our first survey are encouraging, because they show Albanians want better relations with Serbs, because they believe it is in the best interest of both nations, not just due to factors such as European integration,” said Alba Çela, the AIIS deputy director and the study’s author.

ECONOMY AND TOURISM POTENTIAL

Albania-Serbia trade exchanges at only an annual Euro 173 million are dominated by what one Serbian researcher put as medieval time trade on grains and fresh vegetables. Albania’s exports to Serbia account for only 0.7 percent of the total and are mainly focused on fresh vegetables. Meanwhile, imports from Serbia which are seven times higher than exports, at 3.8 percent of total imports, mainly focus on

wheat. “Currently Albania and Serbia are among the poorest countries in Europe, but in hard times more encouraging economic measures are needed. In fact, there is no real trade relation between the two countries,” said Ivan Nikolic of the Belgrade Economics Institute.

“During the last four years trade between the two countries has not experienced an important change. Trade deficit is to a large extent in favor of Serbia, whereas the main goods, on which the trade relation is based are oil and its byproducts, fruit, vegetables, wheat and steel products,” added Nikolic. Sokol Lleshi, an AIIS researcher, said the Albanian economy needs to undertake a number of structural reforms to be more competitive in the region and to have a lower trade deficit in trade relations with Serbia. In this regard, the regional mechanisms of cooperation such as CEI, or RCC can be used for the further development of economic relations between the two countries.

According to him, the EU needs to provide assistance in the financing of different projects that would increase the communication between the two countries such as the Nis-Durres highway. Tourism also holds great potential between the two countries, especially for Albania to increase the current small numbers of tourists from landlocked Serbia. The negative image inherited from the past, the prejudices that the citizens of both countries have, and environmental problems or problems of urban planning were identified as issues hindering the development of the tourism industry in both countries.

“Given that the touristic products in Serbia and Albania are different, common regional packages and offers would create the premises for a successful cooperation between tourism operators in both countries. In this respect, both governments can establish common working groups, which would address various possible strategies of mutual cooperation. In this respect, tourism can become a strong pillar in the Serbian- Albanian relations in the future,” said Dritan Sulçebe, another AIIS researcher.

The Nis-Prishtina-Tirana highway, the Belgrade-Bar-Durres-Vlore railway line, the construction of Corridor 11 from Belgrade to Montenegro and its intersection with the Adriatic-Ionian Motorway i.e. the Blue Corridor, the reconstruction of the Belgrade-Bar rail line and its connection with Albanian harbors are some of the joint project Albania and Serbia have previously identified. The projects are part of the

Berlin Process after a conference on Western Balkans held in August 2014 when German Chancellor Angela Merkel reconfirmed the Western Balkans future into the European Union.

CULTURE & YOUTH

Youth, culture and sports exchanges are considered key to overcome stereotypes between the two countries. Jovan Teokarevic, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science in the University of Belgrade and Chairman of the Board of Open Society Fund Serbia, proposed a number of concrete measures for the improvement of cultural contacts between Serbia and Albania, including the establishment of a Balkan Erasmus that would increase the exchange of students between local universities and the publication of a practical AlbanianSerbian dictionary.

He noted that teaching Albanian language is already a tradition in Serbian universities and that people from both countries should be motivated to learn Serbian and Albanian. Albanian and Serbian authors are rarely translated into the respective languages. Vladislav Bajac, a Serbian writer and publisher, said that there are multiple opportunities to cooperate yet Albanians and Serbians work separately and rarely do work together. "Motivations are needed to undertake common projects such as for example an open call by respective ministries of culture of both countries for publications and translations of books." Pirro Misha, an Albanian writer and publisher, recalled his frequent visits to Belgrade.

"It is always a pleasure to have good friends in Belgrade and to realize that there are individuals and groups whom you share the same ideas with. Reflecting upon the past, I have realized that we currently live in a different environment and we are at a different stage, given that we can move freely without visa and that Serbian players are part of Albanian football clubs. However, there is still a lot to do!" Several Serbian players play in the Albania Superliga, the most famous of whom is Partizani striker Stevan Racic who has helped the Albanian capital city team fight back for the Superliga title in one of their best seasons since the early 1990s when they last won the championship.

MEDIA ROLE

Stereotypes and rare reporting by Albanian and Serbia media also play a key role in the stagnant Albania-Serbia relations. “The football match between Serbia and Albania showed that the media of the two countries suffer from the same phenomenon of stereotyping the neighbor, said Remzi Lani, the executive director of the Albanian Media Institute, referring to a drone incident in the Serbia Albania qualifier in 2014 when the match was abandoned after a fight between football players.

“It should be noted that the media in both countries are no longer free and in this respect the EU has no big influence. We no longer have a media market but rather a media scene, in which mafia and politics rules,” he said. Tamara Skrozza, a journalist with Serbia’s Vreme magazine said the media in both countries cooperates only in periods of crisis and that the EU integration process is displayed in a politicized way in the media.

“The media are bought by strong businessmen linked with politics, whereas the journalists usually present mostly articles on politicians and especially on the Prime Minister. In order to have a real independent media, the journalists need to have economic freedom and the right qualifications. Concerning the media ethical code, there are journalists that are trying to implement this code, but on the other hand in general there is a disregard for this code,” she said.

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