

# Reflections on the Past and the Present in Albanian Foreign Policy

*Ditmir Bushati*

*Ditmir Bushati is the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Albania. This text is adapted from his address to the Israel Council on Foreign Relations in Jerusalem on April 22, 2014.*

Albania is a country situated in a dynamic region, one in which peace and stability have not always been easy to achieve. To a great extent, our geographical position also determines our foreign policy. Today, just as in the past, geography matters. We are part of a region in which some of the most important events in history have taken place. I am referring, of course, to the Mediterranean seaboard and the Balkans. Thus, we Albanians are a Mediterranean people with a strong Balkan touch.

Albania's foreign policy is oriented toward its immediate region and its neighboring countries. Good neighborly relations and mechanisms of political cooperation are crucial to us, not only because they guarantee regional stability and peace but also because they allow the considerable number of Albanians that are constituent communities of some of our neighboring states to feel safe and to prosper wherever they live (Kosovo, Montenegro, Greece, or Macedonia).

However, regional cooperation also serves a greater purpose in our foreign policy, and that is becoming a part of the European Union, which we have been endeavoring to join. Hopefully we will soon have some positive developments regarding our progress on that path. Yet, we do not strive to be merely part of the European Union, but rather of a European of community of values.

When it comes to values, I am proud to say that our two peoples—the Jews and the Albanians—have much in common. Above all, we share with each other the existential battle throughout the centuries that has shaped our collective consciousness and our views on the current state of affairs in the world.

Undoubtedly, the single most important, albeit tragic, historical event in which our people crossed paths was the Holocaust. That was indeed a moment in history that forever marked our memory of World War II and its meaning for our two nations. In those dark years, we saw a group of people who suffered a collective death. In the midst of humanity we saw a group of people without shelter, without a place to live, without the right to exist. President Shimon Peres was correct in

saying that “the years following the Holocaust were more biography than history.” Indeed, with the advent of the Holocaust we witnessed an unprecedented tragedy in which an entire people lost its right to exist.

The more we remember the Holocaust, the more vigilant we must become so as to prevent similar crimes from ever taking place again. Sadly, the ethnic cleansing and the genocidal policies carried out in Bosnia and Kosovo during the 1990s are evidence that many decades after the end of World War II, Europe had not yet learned from the mistakes of the past.

Enduring dividing lines and policies in the Balkans remind us that our region, despite undisputable progress in the course of the last few years, has still not reached the point of no return, at least in terms of being anchored in the EU and transatlantic mechanisms.

I am honored to belong to a people that placed itself on the right side of history during the terrible tragedy that befell the Jews, and demonstrated appreciation of human life. Tolerance, hospitality, and *besa* [a promise] are some of the most time-honored customs of Albanians. They are in our nature. This is why Albanians have always offered shelter and protection, even to strangers. In the *Kanun*, the ancient Albanian codex that was passed down through the generations, there is a line that sums up very well just who we are: “The house of the Albanian is the house of God and of the guest.”

Albania did not only protect Albanian Jews. Jewish families and individuals fleeing persecutions in other European countries sought and received sanctuary in Albania. Every Jew, whether Albanian or foreign, found an open door, a warm heart, and a secure shelter in Albania—exactly what was denied to them by the other European nations from which they fled.

Irrespective of the historical period, ruler, or regime, and despite the hardships Albanians have undergone, it is important to remember that there is simply no history of antisemitism among Albanians and there never will be. In this context, the Albanian government has expressed interest in joining the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) as an observer country.

Presenting the testimony on the unique history of Albanian–Jewish relations can only further encourage respect for diversity and offer an extraordinary model of tolerance and compassion worldwide.

Historical events, such as the ones mentioned above, do not serve only as a reminder of human universal values, but most of all epitomize the general attitude

and the principles on which the Albanian state and its foreign policy are built. They also instill hope in all of us. Nations that have suffered are better able to understand the suffering and pain of others.

Building partnerships with democratic countries is a guiding principle of the Albanian state. I would like to take this opportunity to hail the political and economic achievements of Israel, an accomplished democracy in the Middle East and a country that nowadays is one of the main exporters of science, knowledge, and culture.

The world in which we live today is a very dynamic one, with multipolar and sometimes even zero-polar trends, new rising economic powers, new conflicts, and constant changes of political configurations. Finding one's path and adjusting to these new realities while preserving one's national historical individuality remains a challenge. These are times when we need committed friends to further strengthen the relationship. In our case, the best way to intensify the close historical relationship of our two countries is by means of promotion and further development of economic relations, investment, and entrepreneurship.

There is increased interest from Israeli companies in the Balkan market, specifically in Albania. Israeli companies are already present in key sectors, but there is still untapped potential when taking into account the logistic circumstances and natural resources Albania has to offer, as well as its comparative advantages in the fields of infrastructure, energy, mining, environment, and tourism.

In the framework of strategic investments in Albania, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) project undoubtedly remains of special importance, because above all it will create a positive synergy between the Middle East and Europe, between the Caspian and Adriatic Seas. In other words, it will be a project of peace, and economic and social transformation. Thanks to this project, Albania will provide energy; and will become connected to the international gas transmission network. Linking TAP to the Ionian Adriatic Pipeline (IAP) will ensure energy security for the region and all across Europe, and will create new investment opportunities for Israeli companies in Albania. Another particularly important area for Albania in terms of developing strategic sectors (and with great specific weight to the GDP) is tourism.

Yet foreign investments cannot be obtained without the creation of a favorable business environment. The Albanian government has taken emergency measures toward developing a new economic model based on sustainable economic growth. This, coupled with reforms in key sectors of the economy, is meant to prioritize public investment so that government support will be directed where it is needed

and to introduce a new approach towards state-investor relations. Above all, this new economic model is associated with the rule of law in the economy, new fiscal discipline, the fight against bureaucracy, the encouragement of local industry and finally, the transformation of the country's natural resources into a real factor for growth.

Against this backdrop, we believe that the full potential of trade relations between our countries has not yet been reached. In this context, Albania has much to learn from Israel.

Later today, in my first visit to Yad Vashem, I will have the opportunity not only to contemplate those millions who lost their lives and to listen to those who survived, but also to learn. We always learn how to prevail, how to resist, and how to win. With pride and humility I remember and honor those heroic people—families and individuals—who risked their own lives in order to save the lives of the unknown “Other.” The fact that their names are listed among the Righteous among the Nations bears testimony to the behavior of the Albanian nation toward the Jewish people—behavior that was very rare at the time. It also commemorates the humanity and goodwill of one nation toward another, and will always be seen as a beacon of light in the middle of a long, dark and difficult time. It is my hope that we will all keep working together for a better world, for *Tikkun Olam*.

