

Roundtable Discussion with the Albanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Ditmir Bushati on “The Role of Albanian – Greek Relations in a Challenging European Context”

On Tuesday 22 March 2016 the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP) organized a roundtable discussion with the participation of the **Foreign Minister of Albania, Mr. Ditmir Bushati** who delivered a speech on **the importance of Albanian - Greek relations in the current challenging European context**. This event, which was organized by the South East Europe Programme of ELIAMEP, came at a critical moment for the region's future and was thus attended by representatives of the Diplomatic Corps to Greece, journalists and international relations experts. Comments were made by the **Ambassador (ad hon) Mr. Alexandros Mallias**, and the discussion was moderated by **ELIAMEP's Director General, Dr. Thanos Dokos**.

In the first part of his address, the Albanian Foreign Minister put a special emphasis on the historical dimension of bilateral relations and their strategic significance. In this respect and after making reference to the geographical, historical and cultural bonds that exist between the two nations, he highlighted the perceptions of the two societies toward the other. According to him, “the general perception in Albania is that Greece has not fully accepted the creation of the modern Albanian state, whereas the general perception in Greece is that Albanians have a hidden agenda aimed at diminishing Greece's role in the region”. Then he described his visit to Greece and his presence at ELIAMEP as an attempt to change these misleading perceptions of the past.

Minister Bushati continued his speech with a very brief overview of recent history, in which he identified the painful events and the strong feelings of the 20th century which according to him “explain the great deal of mistrust that exists between the two countries”. He further pointed out that during the last 25 years there was a strange mix of progress and setbacks, underlining the fact that when he took office in September 2013 “bilateral relations were almost frozen, mistrust was high and there were not high level contacts”. However, during the last two and a half years, according to Mr. Bushati, the two countries “have set the train in motion again” thanks to the “policy of small steps” which focuses on the achievement of concrete results. In this context, he made a special reference to the successful resolution of the problem with the “Toponyms” and to the establishment of several joint committees to address existing open issues in an attempt for quick and substantial progress. The Albanian Prime Minister conveyed the message of addressing the inherited pending issues “with no taboos and with mechanisms that can build trust and unleash the positive potential of the two countries' relationship”.

Mr. Bushati dedicated a significant part of his speech to the key open issues that are at the heart of Greek-Albanian relations, dividing them into three different categories. According to him, the first category includes issues inherited from the past such as “the state of war”, “the sequestered properties of Albanians during and after the Second World War” and “the human rights issue of the Cham population and their descendants”. In the second category, he included issues of daily importance such as “the work of the joint bilateral committees” and “consular affairs”. In the third and the last category, Minister Bushati included issues which have a defining importance for the future, such as “the delimitation of the Exclusive Economic Zones and continental shelf”, “trade

relations”, and “energy security”. A special reference was made to the technical state of war that has existed between Albania and Greece since World War Two, with the Albanian Minister considering the abrogation of the Royal Decree of 1940 as a prerequisite for opening a new chapter in Tirana-Athens relations. According to him, “such a decision will unleash positive political energy and help transform the strategic importance of our relations into a true, relevant strategic partnership”. In this context, Minister Bushati did not fail to mention the importance of Tirana-Athens relations, viewing Greece as one of the four strategic partners of Albania, together with Italy, Austria and Turkey.

In the second part of his speech, the Albanian Foreign Minister concentrated on the European and regional context, arguing that any reference to bilateral relations would be incomplete without touching on the situation in the region, the geo-economic developments in Europe, the refugee crisis and its effects. Minister Bushati continued by discussing the possible implications of these developments, noting that the increased concern about the refugee crisis and terrorism, the rise of negative stereotypes and political extremes across Europe, as well as the distrust amongst neighbors and allies have transformed enlargement policy into a second-tier issue, while at the same time have provoked a more heated debate about the re-establishment of borders in Europe and the end of the Schengen area. With regard to Greece’s difficult economic situation, Minister Bushati expressed support for the successful and sustained recovery of the Greek economy because according to him “this is crucial, not only for Greece itself, but also for its neighbors”. He further expressed himself in favor of a unified European response to the refugee crisis, arguing that “Greece cannot be left alone because this is not a Greek problem and there cannot be a Greek solution”. Additionally, he shared the view that “the recent EU-Turkey agreement is a serious effort to respond to the temptation of bringing national responses to a pan-European agenda”, while he expressed his country’s readiness “to be part of a coordinated European response in accordance with its means and capabilities”.

In the last part of his address, Minister Bushati emphasized regional developments and the European integration of the Western Balkans. He pointed out Albania’s state-building efforts and the advancement of EU related reforms, which according to him have energized its country’s role in the region while at the same time have confirmed Albania’s foreign policy alignment with that of the EU. He further emphasized the regional initiatives that have brought the countries of the region much closer to each other, while he underscored the attention that is given to the efforts of building a true region, in economic, political and security terms, a plan facilitated by the Berlin Process. In this context, Mr. Bushati reiterated his country’s position that “Greece must be part of the region’s efforts towards the EU, embracing also the new realities”. The issue of Kosovo falls into this area, which according to him “by recognizing Kosovo, Greece would not be taking sides but would be fulfilling what Greek foreign policy has been trying to achieve in the region since 2003: a substantive contribution to peace, stability and cooperation”.

Minister Bushati concluded by expressing his confidence that there is a way to get out of the current zero-sum-game diplomacy. In his view, the social and economic interdependence that characterize Albanian-Greek relations should be translated into an enhanced cooperation with the Western Balkans in order to help them successfully finalize their democratic state-building process. **“Albania and Greece can show the way”** Minister Bushati underscored.