

**THE EUROPEAN ORIENTATION OF ALBANIA
AND THE WESTERN BALKANS**

*Address of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Kastriot Islami in the
meeting*

*organized by the Institute on Central Europe and countries of the
Danube,*

the Federal Chamber of Commerce

and Raiffeisen Bank

Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my particular pleasure to be here today, at this prestigious institute of worldwide reputation, and to have the opportunity to speak in front of this distinguished audience. My pleasure is twice as much given that this talk is an important fragment of what I would consider as a successful visit to a friendly country, with which we have historically enjoyed amicable relations. I am very happy to be in Austria today, in a great country with eminent historical and democratic traditions, homeland to Metternik, Moxart, Schtraus family, Thomas Klestil, Bruno Kreiskit and Franc Vraniski, who has given a valuable contribution in a difficult period that Albania passed through some years ago.

The Austrian presence in Albania has always been welcomed, and the Albanian government has consistently followed an open-door policy towards Austrian investments. Raiffeisen Bank is a clear evidence of this approach, and we believe that it will serve as an excellent model to bring other Austrian investors closer to our market. The investors in turn, would benefit from the excellent climate of our bilateral political relations as well as from our country's potential, in a context of regional integration and aperture to European markets.

Vienna is one of the EU capitals in closest geographical proximity with Albania. Its geographical position and its natural ties with the countries of our region sanction a common space of mutual interests, which we reciprocally try to promote and institutionalize through a dynamic bilateral and multilateral cooperation. My visit today is a clear and tangible expression of this mutual political will.

A rich history of excellent relations between our countries, bilateral visits and important political messages exchanged between us,

especially in the last years, and in particular the philosophy and vision of your country for the inclusion of the Western Balkans in the European Community, have facilitated my task of sharing with you today the main political orientations of the Albanian Government's foreign policy, leading the country towards the big European family.

Albania has defined a clear European and Euro-Atlantic perspective. These important goals have been converted into long-term objectives, which enjoy full public and political support. This commitment and willingness, based on the "open doors policy" of the institutions we intend to join, and the high attention devoted to the Western Balkans in the Summit of Thessalonica, have been translated in documents such as the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, the Document of European Partnership, The Membership Action Plan of NATO and others. These objectives are the roadmap to achieve our goal, and through our efforts to meet the Copenhagen criteria, we would be able to truly guarantee stability, development and prosperity for our citizens. We want to be part of a united and diverse Europe by merging the European values in the Albanian reality.

At the foundation of the entire reform package that serves as the framework of the Albanian integration process to EU and NATO, undertaken and approved by the Albanian government, lays the democratization and governance of the country through the strengthening and improvement of our democratic institutions, a better use of human and administrative capacities, guaranteeing of basic freedoms, strengthening of rule of law, consolidation of market economy, guaranteeing the basic freedoms and human rights, guaranteeing the stability and economic-social development, strengthening of the fight against corruption, organized crime and illicit trafficking and the free movement through open, but safe borders, etc.

We are confident that the application of this program and drafting a bold action plan of European standards would guarantee the establishment of an Albanian society according to European parameters. The implementation of this action plan is evaluated, monitored and updated on daily basis through the common mechanisms of consultations and systematic negotiations with the international institutions, where the European Commission plays the most important role.

The Western Balkans consists of all units of the Former Yugoslavia as well as Albania. This is a region of naturally proud people, celebrating their nature, their values and their rich history, but most of all, optimistic of their European perspective. In present days, a part of the region, formerly belonging to ex-Yugoslavia, is suffering from a complexity of problems, mostly of ethnic origin. The inherited problems represent today a major obstacle towards integration into EU and NATO. The armed conflicts that raged in almost all ex-

Yugoslav territories for almost a whole decade have complicated even further these processes, requiring the attention and massive involvement of the International Community.

Ethnic problems, as the most acute and complicated in these parts of former Yugoslavia, are believed to have considerable impact in the Region's stability. The current situation emphasizes the need for bigger and closer bilateral and regional cooperation, as a contribution to foster security and stability.

However, our region has reached a stage where today all its components, five states and seven capitals, jointly as well as in their own paths, aspire to or apply for EU and NATO membership.

Progress of individual countries in the integration processes confirms our belief that it has concrete impact to the improvement of understanding and regional cooperation. As each country gets closer to Europe, solutions to different issues affecting our region today will be less and less demanding.

Based on this philosophy the Albanian government has been constantly intensified its work to fulfill its commitments in the framework of the Stabilization Association Agreement, where the regional cooperation and the European vector of its foreign policy are complimentary elements to the whole Euro Atlantic integration processes.

Albania is the only country in the region without ethnic problems, and was not involved in any of the armed conflicts of the last years. Albania witnesses a traditional religious harmony through the centuries.

Being immune to the complex ethnic problems found in the former Yugoslav and post Yugoslav territories, and because of the clear European and Euro Atlantic orientation of our country, it's our belief that a closer and probably a preferential support from the European community for Albania's European track would prove to be more efficient and rewarding to the acceleration of overall integration processes in the region.

We believe that the process of EU integration of West Balkan countries and their regional cooperation process lays on three fundamental principles: 1. Regional integration can be accelerated significantly by the progress of each country in their individual processes of European integration; 2. European integration becomes impossible without achieving regional integration; 3. Regional integration means first of all "Europeanization" of the relations between and among all the countries in the region.

In this context the Albanian government has followed an active and constructive policy with each of the neighboring countries bilaterally, in the framework of different bilateral and multilateral regional initiatives. We have shown openness and genuine interest for dialogue and exchanges in all fields of common interests with the neighbors. We can state that our relations with Italy, Greece and Macedonia are developing very well and an open political dialogue marks the relations with Serbia and Montenegro. Excellent relations have been maintained and developed with other countries of the region such as Turkey, Bulgaria, and Rumania, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia. The current high level of cooperation with all the countries can be attributed to the new philosophy that "the success of each country means success of the entire region and vice-versa".

We also pay great attention to our relations with Kosova, being an integral part of our region. In this regard, we have noted with pleasure that there has been considerable progress in Kosova *vis a vis* standards' implementation, given that UNMIK and the provisional self-governing institutions appear absolutely committed to carry on with reforms and initiatives that promote democratic values.

We consider that certain standards are vital and of precedence for Kosova's progress in the short-run, and have inevitable consequences on the region as well. The issues of minorities, good governance and decentralization are fundamental to developing a stable, prosperous, democratic and functional multiethnic society in Kosova, which in turn would influence on the regional security and stability.

The question of the status on the other hand, has itself matured and dynamically developed with time, thus can no longer be left hostage of the standards' rhetoric. "Standards with status" in mid 2005 can well be the new scenario.

We strongly believe that the final solution will be the outcome of a compromise, taking into account that:

- a) **It should represent the free will of all people of Kosova, expressed through democratic means;**
- b) **It should guarantee protection and respect for all communities' rights;**
- c) **It should enjoy legitimacy, resulting from international support and recognition;**
- d) **It should exclude partition, expansion or contraction Kosova's defined administrative borders;**
- e) **It should generate stability and security for the region;**

We also believe that the final decision-making for Kosova's status should come from the UN Security Council, with the strong support of the US and the indispensable presence of the EU. In a wider political

perspective, what we see for Kosova is an uncompromised European future.

Remaining in the same contest, we consider that Kosova's representation in the regional forums is of essential value, to the benefit of the integration spirit of our region as a whole. Given that our region shares the same problems, Kosova should not be excluded from the debate and commitment that we jointly undertake to tackle them.

I avail myself of this opportunity to assure you that Albania will continue to play its positive, moderate and constructive role in relation to the Albanian factor in the region through encouraging a stable, peaceful, harmonious and multiethnic coexistence. We will continue to foster and strengthen our bilateral relations with all regional countries without any prejudice or bias from the past.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By way of conclusion of my speech, please allow me to reiterate that the Albanian government, the Albanian political spectrum and the Albanian people are determined to walk faster along our path towards Europe, being at the same time open hearted and sincere in our efforts to develop with all our neighbors relationships that will reestablish our region as an important part of Europe, stable, democratic and prospered.

Thank you very much for your attention,