



**By Peter Tase**

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### **Albania has a long road to EU integration**

Despite efforts to join the European Union, Albania remains still quite distant from integration. The Albanian government remains weak and unwilling to prosecute former top level officials, including a former prime minister and others. Another chronic problem is that the judiciary remains a tool of the opposition party – the Democratic Party of Albania – while the prosecutor general's office is weak and ineffective.

Public order and security remain under threat in Albania. For example only in January 2013 there were at least ten bomb incidents. In one case, a cell-phone activated bomb placed in a prefect's car failed to detonate in front of the Prime Minister's Office.

The United States and Albania had secretly arranged an agreement on the decommissioning of Syrian chemical weapons, of more than 1400 tons, that are being shipped to Albania. Under the agreement, besides the Syrian weapons, some 30 toxic sites in Albania would also be cleaned up. Some of these toxic sites are believed to be causing cases of cancer and lung disease among people in the surrounding areas. The Democratic Party of Albania reneged on its promised support for the deal that was reached with U.S. Ambassador Alexander Arvizu, and supported the civil society's peaceful demonstrations in the streets of Tirana. (A

few days before marching in the streets, Democratic Party Leaders had agreed with US Ambassador that they would not place obstacles to the shipment of Syrian Chemical Weapons in Albanian Soil)

So long as Albania has corruption, impunity, traffic of influence and an unjust judiciary are not at the high levels According to the Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, based in Germany; Albania is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe and the most corrupt in the Balkans. The German NGO ranked Albania 95 out of the 176 countries monitored in 2011. This ranking slipped to 113 in 2012 and 116 in 2013, on the RACI Corruption Perception Index. Transparency International, which advocates good governance and an end to corruption, wrote in a recent report, “In Albania corruption is registering a new physiognomy in a favorable political environment, with characteristics like a new systems for money laundering, financing of political parties from illegal activities, the capture of the state through the control of procurement and privatization, human and narcotics trafficking and the impunity of high State officials before the justice system and the law.”

Unlike almost every country in the Balkan region, Albania has not arrested any prominent figures or corrupt government officials to bring them into prosecution and press charges. Arrests have been made on corruption cases for the following: former Romanian Prime Minister Adrian Nastase, former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, former Slovenian Prime Minister Janez Janša, and former Prime Minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina Franjo Tuđman. What about Albania? So far there is no one arrested, prosecution cases remain dormant in the courts for months or years, while in the end just punishment is not handed down. While legalization of Private property is a persisting challenge for Edi Rama’s government, illegal building of private residences and hotel business arising along the Adriatic and Ionian Shores are coming to an halt, however, Prime Minister Rama’s plate is full of challenges, obstacles as well as handle a negative image of Albania abroad. For example, on January 11, 2011, three innocent bystanders, in a peaceful protest were killed by members of Albania’s National Guard while standing on the boulevard near the prime minister’s office. For this crime, and others, such as the

explosions in the Army barracks of Gërdec, in March 15th, 2008, where a whole village was blown into pieces, 27 people died and more than 100 people wounded, there is no one in jail today. Moreover the Defense minister at that time still continues to be a Member of Parliament in the current legislature. This is a genuine sign of how Albania's justice system operates. Incompetence, kleptocracy, lack of professionalism and political demagoguery have been at the center stage of Albanian society in the last 24 years of democracy in transition and continue to ruin Albania's status in the world. Hope remains high for Edi Rama's government to change the national image, establish infrastructure projects with Kosovo and make Albania an instrument of trust, stability and a success story in the Balkans and beyond.

The second country approached was Albania; a request which the country's Prime Minister Edi Rama said also came direct from the United States. According to the Berlin-based Regional Anti-Corruption Initiative, Albania is one of the most corrupt countries in Europe and the most corrupt in the Balkans, plummeting from a woeful 95 out of the 176 countries monitored in 2011, to 113 in 2012 and 116 in 2013, on their Corruption Perception Index.

In their end of year Report, the Initiative quotes Transparency International:

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Protestors against the weapons destruction took to the streets in thousands, some wearing gas masks and protective clothing; protests also took place in neighboring Macedonia, with rallying outside the Albanian Embassy.

Albania Says Sorry, We cannot do it

Albania finally rejected with Edi Rama apologetically groveling to Washington: “Without the United States, Albanians would never have been free and independent in two countries that they are today”, he said referring to Albania and Kosovo and the massive March 24th 1999 – June 10th 1999 NATO and US assault on the former Yugoslavia with depleted uranium weapons which are, of course, both chemical and radioactive. A Science Applications International Report explains re the residue from the weapons:

“Soluble forms present chemical hazards, primarily to the kidneys, while insoluble forms present hazards to the lungs from ionizing radiation ... short term effects of high doses can result in death, while long term effects of low doses have been implicated in cancer.”

In addition to concerns regarding corruption in Albania -terrorist groups would undoubtedly offer high sums for such weapons – safety might surely have been a consideration. In 2008 an explosion at an ammunition storage depot near Albania’s capitol Tirana, killed twenty six people, wounded three hundred and damaged or destroyed five thousand five hundred homes. The disaster was said by investigators to be caused by a burning cigarette – in a depository for 1,400 tons of explosives.

Worse, when Albania was pressured to destroy its own chemical weapons stocks, some tons left over from the Cold War: “The U.S. offered to pay for their destruction and later hired some private company which destroyed the weapon capability of the chemicals but otherwise left a horrendous mess.”

Hazardous waste was left in containers, on a concrete pad, inevitably they started to leak. “In late 2007-early 2008, the US hired an environmental remediation firm, Savant Environmental, who determined the problem was worse than originally thought. Many of the containers were leaking salts of heavy metals, primarily arsenic, lead and mercury.” Moreover, the Conexus – large, steel-reinforced shipping containers – were not waterproof, thus lethally contaminated

condensation and water leakage dissolved some of the contaminants which leaked onto the ground.

“Savant Environmental repackaged the waste and placed it in twenty shipping containers. There it sits, visible from space”, on the concrete pad – in the open.

All in all, why was Albania considered?

It is surely coincidence that on 3rd October last year, Tony “dodgy Iraq dossier” Blair, also an enthusiastic backer of Washington and NATO in their Balkans blitz, was appointed as advisor to the Albanian government to advise the impoverished country how to get in to the EU. Heaven forbid he might have advised that taking on lethal weapons no one else was prepared to touch, might tick quite a big approval box and made a call to someone somewhere in Washington. This is of course, entirely speculation.

However, as Pravda TV opined at the time, apart from the sorely needed financial boost: “It will increase the status and prestige of a poor country in Europe, Albania is in Europe’s backyard, in this case it will be going foreground.”

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