

Albania's Progress:

A View from the Albanian Embassy

Melissa K. Allen

Members of the staff of Albania's Embassy in Washington, DC, candidly acknowledge that from the 1950's to the mid 1980's, Albania was a "hermit kingdom" and suffered from its status as an isolated, remote country. During those years, Albania was an underdeveloped country still locked in the tradition of violent blood feuds that were continued for generations. For about five years after World War II, complete turmoil disrupted the lives of Albanians. Not until Enver Hoxha and Mehmet Shehu effectively eliminated all opposition and consolidated power did Albania become a thoroughly totalitarian state based on the Soviet model and capable of providing the security of a maximum security prison.

When Enver Hoxha died in 1985 many Albanians were deeply troubled and mourned the death of their leader. Not long after Hoxha's death, the first signs of a desire for the liberalization of this hardline regime began to appear among Albania's increasingly restive population. As the surrounding communist regimes were falling, Albania began its slow march toward democratic thinking. Rejecting its long-held "hermit country" status, Albania sought relationships with the West in order to improve its economic standing and diplomatic status. Those people who constitute the staff of the Albanian Embassy in the United States were at the forefront of this dramatic movement. Aleksandr Salabanda, a medical doctor who had been forced into internal exile during the communist period, is the current Albanian Ambassador to the United States. Working as an intern in the Albanian Embassy in 2009, I have had the opportunity of understanding the viewpoint of those people who are responsible for leading the process of democratic change in the international community.



Melissa Allen with Albanian Ambassador Aleksandr Salabanda

The first significant step toward democracy took place in March 1991 when the Communist party claimed victory in apparently rigged elections but surrendered power in the face of overwhelming public demonstrations. In 1992 the Democratic Party won by electing Sali Berisha as the first president of a post-communist Albania. In 1997 economic and political disaster struck Albania when gangster very nearly took power. Widespread and often violent popular protests produced turmoil that forced Sali Nerisha was forced out of office and threatened Albania's progress toward democratic stability.

Uncertainty continued for several years as political figures like Iller Meta and Alfred Moisiu attempted to improve the country's political and economic situation. Political infighting and intrigue undermined their attempts to improve Albanian living standards. The reform process is being continued today by the current Albanian president, Mamir Topi.

While the domestic situation has yet to reach the hopes of the Embassy leadership, these individuals can take solace in their diplomatic accomplishments. In April 2008 Albania was invited to start accession talks for NATO membership and the formal documents were signed in July 2008. On 1 April 2009 Albania became a member of NATO. As a NATO member, the main focus for Albanian policy has become defense and security reform. While Albanian diplomats might note that the path toward NATO membership was long one they suggest that, considering the difficulties of Albania's past, it was a relatively smooth process. The process of meeting accession requirements was often complicated, as in their efforts to insure good relations with Albania's neighbors, and sometime embarrassing as they note with regard to the effort to reduce official corruption, a phenomenon which even touched the Embassy itself in the past. On balance, Albania has shown great interest and made significant progress in promoting democracy at home and abroad, as evidenced by their support for the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan

The view from the Albanian Embassy is one of optimism and determination. They say their next challenge is to be accepted into the European Union. The process for accession into the Union began in January 2003. The last update on their pursuit of EU membership indicated that Albania could officially apply in June 2009. Embassy personnel are optimistic that the process of accession into the European Union will be as smooth as the NATO process. Albania's Washington based diplomats take pride in the fact that their nation has come a long way since the grim days of Enver Hoxha and is continuing its growth in developing ever stronger relations with the Western World.