

**CENTER FOR
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**ALBANIA'S ROAD TO NATO MEMBERSHIP
AND KOSOVO'S FUTURE STATUS**

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FOREIGN MINISTER OF ALBANIA**

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STEPHEN FLANAGAN: Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Stephen Flanagan, senior vice president here and director of the International Security program. And it is a pleasure to welcome you for this conversation, this dialogue as part of our Statesmen's Forum with His Excellency Lulzim Bashim, the minister of foreign affairs of Albania. The minister has served in that position since May of last year and he's here to talk to us today about the issues of Albania's aspirations for NATO membership, the important political developments throughout Southeastern Europe, and in particular, of course, the very difficult and sensitive situation of Kosovo these days.

I will just say a few words about his background. You have seen in the announcement some more details about it. He has been a member of the cabinet in previous service. Before coming into the foreign ministry, he served as minister of public works, transportation and telecommunications, '05 to '07. He has been active in Albanian politics in the Democratic Party of Albania, of course, as a member of the assembly since 2005. He also held a number of other leadership positions in the Democratic Party and was spokesman for the 2005 general election campaign.

Prior to that, he held a number of positions with the U.N. mission in Kosovo, in Pristina. He was a special advisor for transition in the department of justice. And he also served as deputy chief of cabinet, and director and legal advisor to the justice department during that period of initial transition to fuller sovereignty. Prior to that, he was also involved in the Kosovo issue as a member of the investigative team of the international tribunal on war crimes in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, focused particularly on the actions of Serbian forces in Kosovo at that time.

He is an attorney, a lawyer by training. He received his master's degree in the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands where he focused on public European and international law, so a background that serves him very well. And you can see why he ended up first in UNMIK and then now in dealing with these issues of future status and other questions in Kosovo.

The minister will speak for about 20 minutes. This, as with all Statesmen's Forum events, this event is on the record. It will be televised on our internal network and available for the public later. He has agreed to take some questions that will also be on the record. So we look forward to a good discussion on these issues. And it's a pleasure to welcome Minister Basha to the Statesmen's Forum podium today.

(Applause.)

LULZIM BASHA: Thank you very much, Mr. Flanagan. It's a pleasure to be back here. I recall my first time here which was a few months – eight months ago – and a few days after I had received my appointment as minister of foreign affairs. We had, I

recall, a very good conversation, discussion around the table. I was expecting to be around the table again, but this is also very good. And with your kind permission, I think after a small introduction and update since that last appearance here before you, I would like to take questions from you and turn this into an informational session rather than a long speech, which of course I have here with me prepared.

The purpose of my visit to the United States is, again, to meet with Secretary Rice and several other members of the U.S. administration. I just came from the White House where I had a meeting with a deputy advisor of national security and former ambassador to Tirana, James Jeffrey. I'll have meetings on the Hill with senators and congressmen, and of course one of the most welcome opportunities for me when I'm here in Washington is to speak to influential members of the community of researchers and decisionmakers on matters of international affairs. And I highly welcome this opportunity and would like to thank each one of you for being present here today to exchange some thoughts on the current developments in the region as well as brief you on some of the latest developments with regard to Albania's path to Euro Atlantic integrations.

Allow me to brief you shortly as to where we stand today. Two are our major goals in terms of reforms and political processes: integration into NATO, integration into European Union. Both processes enjoy overwhelming support of the Albanian public – 96 percent, according to the latest polls for NATO; anywhere between 94 and 96 for the EU. And the government is trying hard to identify the missing 4 percent. But both these processes, which have the full backing of Albania's citizens require reforms. And Albania has launched a path of reforms in order to come closer to these stated goals with various degrees of success.

Tomorrow, after the meeting with Secretary Rice, I will be flying back to Brussels to join the prime minister and the minister of defense on a very important meeting with the NATO Council of Ambassadors. It is the meeting that finalizes the ninth cycle of the membership action plan, which hopefully for Albania will be the last cycle before the Bucharest summit in which we hope Albania will be extended an invitation to join together with the other two countries of the Adriatic Three Charter.

Our primary focus for this ninth cycle has been the reform of the judiciary and electoral reform. But before I go into that, let me update you on the three major directions in which this government has been primarily focused ever since its swearing into office after the elections of 2005, primarily the fight against corruption, the fight against organized crime, and the effort to continue vigorous economic growth, even in what seems to be the end of a transition phase and the beginning of a more consolidated phase as far as the Albanian economy is concerned.

For a long time, the problem of organized crime has overshadowed other issues in Albania. And it has also become one of the major problems of its image abroad. Recognizing this, this government stated its policy of zero tolerance against crime. And as a result, we launched a number of initiatives and operations aimed directly at the

activities of organized crime, one of the most notorious and powerful and rich structures in Southeast Europe. There is no special or secret strategy that we employed; in fact, it's a pretty straightforward one based on a political will to fight crime.

This means that we had, and continue to enjoy, the full capacities at the state level, at the law enforcement level, to fight crime. And anecdotally, when the top brass of Albanian police was asked what they needed to pursue these criminals, their answer was pretty straightforward. They said, what they needed is that once they started, they would not be stopped. One of the U.S. congressmen who visited Albania on the eve of the visit of President Bush asked a uniformed policeman on the street – I think this story made the rounds also in international press – what the difference was. How come Albanian organized crime in two years had been hit so hard? And the policeman said, now, the guys we are going for do not receive a call before we go.

What is the result of this approach? Already in the first 12 months since September 2005, 207 criminal organizations and gangs were dismantled, representing the bulk or the backbone of Albanian organized crime – 870 individuals are today in jail facing extradition or trial. We have seen the completion of the first trials in January, which have been administered by the special prosecutor's office and the special heavy crimes court.

We have a very successful moratorium on speedboats in effect, a measure that did not go without a political cost to this government, but which resulted in accordance with the figures of Italian police in a dramatic and uncomparable drop in the amount of traffic of illicit substances as well as human trafficking, making Albania today a country which is not anymore considered a country of origin for human trafficking, and not the preferred transit route for narcotics or other illicit trades.

Asset confiscation and crime witness system – a system of protection for witnesses of heavy crime – have also worked very effectively. And the result is that whereas crime was not simply going about its business but was also exerting its influence and showing its presence in our squares and our cities. Today, those who have still avoided the grip of justice are fleeing, trying to adapt, but we are in hot pursuit. And this pursuit will not relent until they are apprehended. Crime today does not exert influence in Albania, economic, political, or otherwise. It is irrelevant and it is a story that shows that however powerful or notorious or determined crime may be, it can never compare with the power and the strength of a government that has a will to fight it, which of course everybody knows it's true; but in this case it had to be proven true once again.

Crime and corruption are, of course, very much linked with each other. And the attempt of organized crime to exert influence in political decision making was only one of the faces of corruption in the government. As explained in May last year when I was first here, our primary effort in the fight against corruption was aimed at reducing the possibilities for corruption in the administration itself. We moved ahead by cutting by 40 percent operational expenses of the government, by reducing by 13 percent the civil service, by 30 percent public administration. Only the operational expenses reduction

amounted in 2006 to 80 million euros, equal to the 2006 overall budget for healthcare, for public healthcare.

We toughened the regulations on conflict of interest, making it impossible for members of the administration to hold private economic interests. And we passed a whistleblower law, awarding 6 percent of the proceeds and a crime witness status to those citizens who came out and reported corruption – 80 percent of the current cases under prosecution are the result of such reports. In the past six months, 50 middle- and high-ranking officials have been apprehended and are facing prosecution, which of course is according to the statistics, the highest number in Southeastern Europe and the highest number in Europe for the moment.

The majority, the overwhelming majority of these officials, elected and appointed, are affiliated with the governing coalition. Thus, no one can claim that this is being used as a tool to enhance political infighting. But all of these results, which are coming as a consequence of political will to fight corruption regardless of political affiliation are of course not sufficient if there is not a systematic effort in place to prevent and address the issue of corruption in a systematic way, to make these gains irreversible.

And realizing this, our attention has been focused on shrinking the margin of the discretion of the administration and making administrative procedures as transparent and accountable as possible. In this regard, our energy has been focused primarily in fighting bureaucracy in those areas where it was really creating the most conducive climate for corruption. Let me give you a couple of examples. From 148 licenses in the public works sector, we are now down to 42. From four to 12 weeks, we are down to one week. From 10 to 11 to 1500 dollars per license, we down to one euro per license, with half of those licenses being granted automatically upon no response within seven days.

It took 42 days to register a business in Albania in 2005. We brought it down to eight days in 2006. In Tirana, in Durrës, now it can be done in one day in a one-stop shop. And this practice will be spread throughout the country in 28 centers. It's something that we're doing in cooperation with the Millennium Challenge Account and the United States aid agency.

Corruption in fiscal and customs service has been fought effectively. With the previous system of taxation in 2006, we were able to generate a rise, a surge in revenues, among 2 percent of GDP. This year, for the first time, we have a 10 percent flat-tax regime on personal income tax, a 10 percent flat-tax regime on corporate tax, a reduction of 31 percent on social security tax, and still we were able in 2007 to perform by collecting 27 percent of the GDP as revenue for the government. So as our fiscal burden declined, as our taxes declined, our revenues picked up.

And of course, this is a very welcome result for the monetary, for the fiscal and budgetary policies of any government. But the primary focus was to make the procedures transparent and to fight informality, which is and continues to be a problem. The result of such moves, fighting the informality, is also tangible. In 2007, there were

12,600 business registered. Now, I think there is nobody who can come here and tell you that 12,600 businesses were opened up in 2007 because that is not the case. Regardless of the fact that Albanian economy grew by 6 percent, inflation remained 2.9 and budget deficit 2.6. But it is the result of businesses coming from the shadows of informality into formality, paying less than they were obliged to pay. Maybe those who did not pay taxes are now incentivized because the amount they have to pay to the government is less than the bribes they had to pay to the customs and the fiscal services before. But most importantly, to enjoy the benefits of being within the legal framework, of being formalized.

The same holds true for a major reform of legalizing assets that were built without a permit in the period '92 to 2005, amounting to about 200,000 dwellings and businesses, a collateral value of about \$5 billion, equal to 50 percent of Albania's GDP last year, a little bit more given the rate of the dollar against the lek. The most impressive results of this policy in economic terms are those that are coming from our data on growth of certain branches of economy such as construction and tourism, foreign direct investment, and exports.

Foreign direct investments in 2007 last year grew by 84 percent, including strategic privatization, or 60 percent if you count those privatizations out. That was up from 2006, which in itself enjoyed a 54 percent increase of FDI. This year, it is going to be – this is going to be nothing compared to this year because last year we extended licenses and permits for 2.6 billion euros of investments. In the energy sector, 1.2 billion, in the raw material sector, cement, and we are expecting even more in the areas of mineral deposit exploitation and other foreign investments.

Tourism grew by 74 percent. Rinas Airport, which was completely rebuilt in February last year to house 750,000 passengers, this year has already reached the mark of 1.1 million passengers. And just a few days before the Davos meeting with the CEO of the company that runs it, they are asking permission for the expansion plan to be put into execution now and for the expansion to be bigger than anticipated.

Exports grew 28 percent, not counting the re-exported goods. So overall the economic growth has been marvelous, especially in the light of a year of record drought in a country where 99 percent of the energy is coming from hydropower, and actual natural consumption by industry rose by 12.3 percent.

The luxury of adequate revenue collection, or more than adequate in terms of our agreement with the IMF, has allowed us to proceed aggressively with our expenditure plan, which is dominated by four – by five major areas: overhaul of infrastructure, doubling of investments in education, health, appropriation of 2.01 percent of GDP on military expenditures starting from this year, two years before our commitment to NATO, as well as an incremental increase of pensions and salaries across the board. For this year, besides the electoral and judicial reforms, which have provided not only an opportunity, but also a successful platform to launch the kind of bipartisan cooperation never witnessed before in our political scenery.

Pension reform is going to be on the agenda. We hope it will have a successful running. It will be in an early form where, again, we will reach out to the opposition for a bipartisan pact. And it is also a year where, thanks to the reforms that we have undertaken, including and with special focus on what we expect to be successful finalization of the new law in the judiciary, a successful start of the production of biometric cards and IDs and electronic voter registry, and a successful year as far as using the institutional tools for constructive political dialogue between government and opposition.

We will witness in Bucharest the extending of an invitation to Albania to join NATO. This is a process that we all understand to be based on individual performance and individual merit; having said that, it is without – it is beyond any doubts that Albania's accession to the alliance is an added value to the alliance. If there is a constant appraisal vis-à-vis my country, that is the appraisal for its foreign policy and its constructive role originally and further. We continue to play that role in the past nine months, with particular attention to the situation in Kosovo, where a calm restraint, moderate, and confident approach by the leadership in Pristina has definitely helped the agenda of Washington and Brussels to bring a lasting solution to that issue and to open the path for a lasting solution to the region's perspective.

We have continued to contribute to security operations of NATO acting as de facto allies in Afghanistan, in Bosnia. We have continued unwavering in our participation in Iraq, and even increased it, and are soon going to contribute to the U4 mission in Chad to help with humanitarian situation that is affecting that country as a result of the crisis in Darfur. Overall, the performance of our troops abroad has been ranked as very good and the confidence in the abilities of our armed forces to act interdependently with other armed forces has reason. Reform of our armed forces has been praised as unparalleled in the region, and now we are hoping that the moment to harvest the fruits of all these efforts, nine years of membership action plan, 17 years of unwavering cooperation with the alliance, even in the darkest days for my country, is not so far away.

Finally, we are hoping that the efforts that we are making, but also our neighbors are making to achieve better prosperity for our citizens and to open up the perspective of development for all strata of society are not going to be held hostage by external development, such as that of the still unresolved issue of Kosovo. We hope that we are now, if not days, at least weeks away from resolving it. We are mindful of the still complex nature of this issue and the impact it has, primarily on Serbia. We are mindful of Serbia's struggle, internal struggle, between its past and its future. We strongly believe that its future is rooted in European and Euro-Atlantic perspectives. And we are looking very carefully at the electoral process that is taking place there, hoping that this will be one chance that Serbia will not miss. This is, I think, a short, brief – well, it's not very short – that I wanted to give you. And I will be very happy to answer any of your questions or engage in conversation. Thank you.

MR. FLANAGAN: Thank you, Mr. Basha, for that rather comprehensive picture and quite encouraging picture, I guess, about internal developments in Albania and hope for the region. We have just half an hour for questions. If I just ask you to identify yourself please and wait. We have people with microphones who will come if you just raise your hand. Any questions? Yes, here in the middle?

Q: I'm Brian Barry, reporter for Euro Politics. Just wondering, what's your opinion on the deployment of the European Union's mission to Kosovo? How should that come about? And also on the recognition of Kosovo, when – if and when do you think that should come about also?

MR. BASHA: My understanding is that the deployment of ESDP, the preparations for the deployment of ESDP are going forward, that despite the fact that there are some members of the European Union who still haven't made up their mind as to how they will react to the moment of Kosovo's proclamation of independence, that this is not holding the preparations hostage, that the preparations are continuing, and that there is no opposition to the deployment of such a mission.

The legal basis for this, of course, has been a matter of discussion for some time, but now there is a consensus that 1244 continues to provide a legal basis for the deployment of ESDP into Kosovo. It's an important step because it is dealing not so much with D-Day, the moment of – or I-Day, I should call it, the UDI-Day, but is dealing with the period after status, and in doing so it is highlighting a shift in the discussion. The discussion right now is not anymore when will this happen, because this will happen, it's a matter of days, it's a matter of weeks. It could be February, beginning of it, maybe a little bit later; it doesn't matter, it will happen.

It is important to recognize now that already, de facto, Kosovo and its leadership has assumed all the responsibilities of a sovereign, international subject, and is acting in full partnership with the EU and the U.S. to overcome the complexities of the period before and immediately after the proclamation of status, at the same time reasserting its aspirations to join immediately the Euro-Atlantic and European trajectory of integrations that has gripped the entire region.

In this regard, Albania continues to closely consult and coordinate with Pristina, with Washington, and with Brussels. And as Pristina's leaders have made it clear time and over again, it will be in this fashion and in this manner that the process of formalization of independence will be brought to a conclusion to open the path for the other processes that follow, for the other challenges, which in our view are the challenges that face every other nation in the area, those of the Euro-Atlantic and European integration.

Q: Mr. Minister, if I could just interject there and ask you, as you mentioned, the patience and caution that the leader in Pristina has taken thus far, but obviously I think this, the sense of patience, may be wearing a bit thin, or the efforts of some European governments to delay further the actual implementation of the Ahtisaari plan. What is

your sense, without putting a timeline on it, what is your sense of the mood in Pristina in terms of what their expectations would be? What might be seen as tolerable reasons for delay and what the expectations there are?

MR. BASHA: I think the geometry of this game has changed. Everybody knows now, everybody knows, that Kosovo is going to be soon a sovereign, independent state and that this state will be recognized by the United States, by the biggest powers in the European Union, and by the overwhelming majority of the members of the European Union, just as they know that they are going to be recognized by the majority of the international community: in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere. So all the energy is focused now, rather than on the date, which has assumed a rather trivial value, to the challenges that are connected to this moment and immediately afterwards.

Several challenges: those of peace and security and stability in the moments immediately after proclamation; cooperation, interethnic cooperation between all people in Kosovo, Albanians and Serbs and other minorities; issues that are related to Kosovo's membership in international organizations, from the United Nations to international financial instruments and others; issues that are related to the responsibility that will finally be fully vested without alibis on the shoulders of Kosovo's leaders for ensuring economic prosperity; and most importantly, their already stated goal, clearly stated goal of European and Euro-Atlantic integrations. These are the dimensions where Kosovo is already acting as a de facto, as a member of the international community, as a sovereign member of the international community.

And these are factors that have trivialized – made trivial the discussion about the date. Having said that, this will not become so trivial if the date issue was not a matter of days or weeks at the most. This issue, and in our view there isn't a single factor from the quaint or broader, that sees this as more than a matter of days and weeks.

MR. FLANAGAN: Okay, thank you Mr. Basha. Why don't we take a few questions from the floor? Mr. John Sedrock (ph) and this one over here?

Q: Thank you very much. Mr. Minister, thank you very much for coming. I have a very warm spot in my heart for Albania ever since I visited there for the first time in March of 1997, which was not exactly a settled time if you will recall. I'm a very strong advocate, for what it's worth, on a personal level of integration, Euro-Atlantic integration for Albania, and also membership for NATO.

My question is, the term has been used, the Adriatic Three: Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia. What should happen? Should all three be integrated in Bucharest? What would your country's reaction be if only one were to be nominated and accepted? What would happen as a consequence if Albania were not? What is the long-term implication and what would your desires be? Tough question, but I think I'm not the only one who has that as a curiosity. Thank you.

MR. FLANAGAN: Let's see if this other question is related perhaps or not, but go ahead. Why don't you put it to the minister and we'll?

Q: (Inaudible) – Minister Basha, what is the purpose of the visit tomorrow with Condoleezza Rice and who initiated the visit, your side or the American side?

MR. FLANAGAN: Okay.

MR. BASHA: Let me start by referring to the question that was asked just before these two questions. We strongly believe that delays in the status issue that are not in the framework of preparing the ground logistically and moving forward, but are simply delays because of uncertainties, are very dangerous, are inherently dangerous to stability in the Balkans. They are dangerous because of the situation on the ground. They are dangerous because it is delays that have strengthened the radicals and weakened the moderates, particularly in Serbia. And there are dangers because they continue to drain away focus and energy from the process of enlargement of NATO in Southeastern Europe.

So moving ahead with the status or keeping in mind that we should all be engaged in doing our best for the moderate forces in Serbia to have a chance to push forward their cause of European, Euro-Atlantic integration. So moving ahead with the status is very important, also in the framework of the expansion of NATO because bringing in the Adriatic Three countries, solving the Kosovo status, resolving the issue, and moving forward with integration of the three prospective members, permanently cements in our view the Euro-Atlantic horizon for the Balkans.

Now, each of the countries has an individual membership action plan to live up to. Each of the countries has its own challenges and its own strong points. Our view, although the formal appraisal will be done tomorrow, is each of the countries has made further progress during this ninth cycle on this internal process of reforms and other parameters. But there is an overall consensus that besides the internal reform aspect, there is also a geo-strategic aspect to this, and seeing from this geo-strategic perspective, these three countries offer undisputedly added value to the alliance. They will be an added value to the alliance. Bringing them into the alliance is good for the alliance. Of course, it is good for each of these countries as well, but it is without any hesitation I'm saying this, good for the alliance.

Now, there are instruments to move forward in this process. These instruments have been deployed before in the case of previous successions, and they are the appraisals of the membership action plans. Each country is appraised on its own merits. There are issues that affect one another: the issue of – some issues that our eastern neighbor has with our southern neighbor, which we hope will be resolved. These are bilateral issues, in essence, but they of course have an impact on the overall progress of the process.

Nevertheless, while fully adhering to the view that taking all three in Bucharest is value to the alliance, we are strongly committed to the individual performance system that the alliance itself has put up, and this is the way that we want to be measured. But if you ask us, all three must come in, and all three, the coming in of all three, is a value to the alliance. Of course, the measurement will be on an individual basis. This is – we are sending, we have had all along throughout these nine years of the membership action plan. Individual performance is measured by the alliance. And so far, all of the signals that we have received in our frequent weekly and daily contact with the allies is – all the feedback is positive feedback. We have moved forward in the reforms that we have started. We've taken steps to make some of these results irreversible and systematic in nature.

We have moved forward in two strong challenges for my country, which are electoral reform and judicial reform. Just two days ago, we received the information that the bipartisan commission on judicial reform has agreed all but 15 of the 41 articles of the new law in the judiciary, which means, most probably, that even if we don't bring the product to Brussels after tomorrow, we will be able to bring it to the council before the Bucharest summit. And so far, there are no red flags coming up. There are no red flags coming up. The country, as I said, fully supports it: 96 percent support. And it would be taking a lot to alter this course in these last weeks.

Also the feedback of the allies is positive and there's a fundamental shift in the stance, for instance, of Sarkozy's France towards NATO's expansion. And we're seeing the same spirit in Rome. We're seeing the same in Berlin and London, in Madrid. So we have reasons to be increasingly optimistic. But also we are committed to work until the final day, receive the invitation, and then the world will triple – (chuckles) – of course.

MR. FLANAGAN: On the purpose – on the purpose of the meetings with Secretary Rice –

MR. BASHA: NATO will be – from our side, from my side – will be featuring very strong in my conversations with Secretary Rice, Kosovo, I imagine, and regional issues, and, of course, continuous bilateral cooperation both in the narrow sense of the word as in the multilateral sense of the word, our common fight against international terror and our common fight for the values and the principles we believe in: freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Q: Did you ask for the meeting?

MR. BASHA: I'm sorry?

Q: Did you ask for the meeting?

MR. BASHA: My primary – the agenda was based on a visit to New York where Albania is hosting – where Israel is Yad Vashem is hosting a special exhibition on Albania's – on the Albanians that saved Jews during the war. On this occasion, I asked

to be in D.C. and to undertake several meetings. I did not ask specifically for the meeting, but, between the offices, it was agreed and here I am. Of course, I am delighted to see Secretary Rice.

MR. FLANAGAN: Okay. Maybe a couple more questions and, first of all, Stan Kober in the third row there.

Q: Stanley Kober with the CATO Institute. Why are you so confident NATO will still be around?

MR. BASHA: Whether it will still be around?

Q: Yeah.

MR. BASHA: Because I'm an optimist and I don't see anything better around. (Chuckles.) What is your view on NATO? Let me shoot back.

(Laughter.)

Q: No – about 25 years ago, I had an article in International Affairs in London whether NATO would survive the – (inaudible) – missiles. I said, yes, but give it another generation. I'm not so sure another crisis will come along. And I'm looking at Afghanistan. Afghanistan does not look good and even our officials call it an existential crisis.

MR. BASHA: NATO is the best we have, not only for collective security but also the most successful proof of successful expansion of nations that are emerging from the shadows of dictatorship, suppression of human rights, of freedom of speech, into nations that are building democracy, free-market economies, and respecting human rights. It has moved from being a political-military alliance – military-political alliance to fight the Warsaw Pact to be the club that represents the values that every emerging democracy aspires to. And those are the values of democracy, respect for human rights, free-market economy.

And, to us, it is primarily a political commitment. It is also the best investment in our collective security. It is also the only vision that we have in terms of security for the rest of our region that has not yet been integrated into these structures. And, together with EU, it forms part of a vision that Albania has, but also that the other countries have in the region and it is important to keep this vision in mind and to keep in mind that all of these efforts that we are doing, all of the reforms we are doing, of course, are a purpose in itself, but they are also profiting a lot from the fact that they're being undertaken in the framework of such important aspirations.

This vision is there and it is important for everybody to remember this, especially those in the region who momentarily may be feeling a little bit the courtship of let me say powers that do not share this vision for Southeastern Europe because in order to get there,

you have to have the vision first. We have left behind a very difficult decade. We have left behind very difficult two centuries for the people of Southeastern Europe. And we really do not see any other way to move forward and ensure our prosperity than integration into NATO and European Union. We don't see anything else better around.

MR. FLANAGAN: Mr. Minister, if I could just ask you, in light of that comment about the support within the various NATO countries for these missions, so-called expeditionary missions, be it in Afghanistan or – well, it's not a NATO mission – your country's involvement in Iraq. How do you see support in Albania evolving over time? The Canadians, just last week, the commission advising Prime Minister Harper suggested that they could extend their stay beyond 2009 if other allies came up with additional forces. Do you see that as something, as you talk to your colleagues, do you see any resonance of that? And what about the debate within Albania? Do Albanians question what are we doing in Afghanistan and why is this – what does this have to do with Albanian security?

MR. BASHA: Afghanistan has to do with sharing the primary values which today have made the United States and Albania – former foes – allies. And this is a belief in universal values of human rights, democracy, and rule of law. We believe in freedom and freedom has no price; it's priceless. We believe, as our prime minister put it in the general assembly, that the world without Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, Mullah Omar, and Osama bin Laden is a better world.

And I believe that everybody in this world has an obligation to work towards such realities, including young and emerging democracies like Albania, especially, since our memories of suppression of those freedoms and what it cost to individuals, but to generations, to the course of an entire nation's history, are still fresh. So I think this is the key with which one can unlock the mysteries of the commitment of Albania and other young democracies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

MR. FLANAGAN: We have time for a few more questions if there are some from the floor. No – oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead again, sir.

Q: Lamburg Nuk (ph), correspondent – Mr. Ambassador, since Russia has objection as far as for the independence of Kosovo, did you try somehow to convince Moscow to change positions?

MR. BASHA: We have worked with all of the governments to ensure the best understanding for the way forward with regard to the process of Kosovo's status. And, of course, we have continuously engaged with the government of Russia, as well, at diplomatic levels. I have met with Minister Lavrov, with other members of his diplomatic apparatus, the prime minister, the other – so we have had frequent contact with him. We met in good bilateral relations with Russia. We maintain, as much as possible, our relations with Serbia and try for this issue not to become an issue that has an impact on bilateral relations, but our positions on Kosovo are diametrically opposed.

We strongly believe that the Ahtisaari plan is the only way forward. We strongly believe that delays are not constructive, to the contrary, that they are inherently dangerous to peace and security, which are the primary responsibilities of the Security Council. But differences of opinions in this area – we're trying for them not to influence our bilateral relations. And we strongly hope and believe that once this moment has been overcome that cooperation between all parties will further contribute to stability in the region.

MR. FLANAGAN: We'll just ask one more question from the chair, if you don't mind. Minister, you were involved, yourself, in Kosovo in the protection of human rights there and fundamental freedoms for Albanian Kosovars and making other investigations in crimes against Albanians in Kosovo. What do you say to Serbian Kosovars today as you look, if you were to go to Mitrovitsa or – talking about how these rights – what do you think that Serbs in Kosovo can look to in the aftermath of full independence and the protections that are in place for protecting their rights and fundamental freedoms?

MR. BASHA: I think for all of those Serbs who call Kosovo their home, there is a future in independent Kosovo, a future in which they will be treated as equal citizens, a future in which they will be guaranteed rights and freedoms under the Ahtisaari plan that have no parallel in the geography of this planet or in the history of human kind. Now, this hasn't been said enough.

There is no other place in the world where a minority has enjoyed more rights than the Ahtisaari plan foresees for the Serb minority. So for those Serbs who call Kosovo home, there are ample opportunities to build a new life in their home in Kosovo. For this, they should be prepared to consider themselves Albanians' equals and to join hands for a future to leave behind the past. Albanians have to be prepared for this as well. And they have been on the receiving end of atrocities for the past century. So it is going to be even more challenging for them to take this step forward, but we have full confidence in the Kosovar leadership, in Hashim Thaci's government, who has shown statesmanship by reaching out to the Serbs already in the first days in government.

We have also confidence those Serb politicians in Kosovo who, in their heart, have the genuine interests of Kosovars and Serbs and who are not willing to be used as a ploy for third-party interests. There is plenty of space and opportunities in Kosovo for Albanians and Serbs to continue not only to coexist, but to cooperate strongly for a better future for their children. And independent Kosovo will provide an opportunity to do so because, if anything, the Albanians of Kosovo that have very fresh memories of the structural discrimination against them, have also so far demonstrated – and I am convinced they will continue to demonstrate – a readiness not to have those legacies be repeated to the minority, to the Serbs, in Kosovo.

And, as I said, very important that there is a vision for Kosovo, a vision which is the vision shared by the majority of the countries in the region and that is the vision based on European values and Euro-Atlantic values. And respect for minorities, trust and confidence-building between majority and minority are some of the cornerstone values of

these organizations, of the European Union and NATO. And this is clearly understood by the political establishment in Kosovo and it is also understood by Kosovar Albanians, where tolerance has always been an issue, both inter-religious and inter-ethnic. Again, I would like to refer to this exhibition that Yad Vashem is displaying in New York to the face that Albania is the only country where the number of Jews during the war, under occupation, increased. I didn't know by how much, but I was told by 1,000 percent by the organizers of the museum.

Religious tolerance has been a virtue and a value that we can export proudly. In October, we are hosting, in the framework of the Alliance of Civilizations, an inter-confessional tolerance conference, in Tirana. And so, basically, this goes to say that we have full confidence that independent Kosovo will be home for all of those who want to call it home.

MR. FLANAGAN: Well, thank you, minister, and I think that's a great coda to your discussion. (Applause.) Thank you for your openness and your candor and for some very good news about developments in Albania. We, having watched your country grow over the last decade, the last 17 years, as you pointed out, it's really been a remarkable achievement. And as someone who was around when you signed your map agreement with NATO, I'm hopeful that your road to – the road to Bucharest will be a smooth and promising one. And afterwards, as you said, some of the even harder work may begin, but, in any event, I think many Americans certainly do appreciate Albania's contributions to your Atlantic stability and we wish you well. And thank you for joining us, once again, here at CSIS at the Statesmen's Forum. Thank you.

MR. BASHA: Thank you very much.

(END)