

Op-Ed by OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis

Published in Albanian newspapers on 9 February 2009

I last visited Tirana less than a year ago, in March 2008, just two weeks before Albania received its invitation to join NATO. I am happy to be returning to Albania, a country optimistic, resolute and devoted to the European integration process. This time, I also represent the OSCE, an Organization, which is committed to Albania's Euroatlantic course.

I decided that the Western Balkans should be my first destination as the OSCE Chairperson precisely because the OSCE is in a unique position to help the region on its road to progress. The Organization incorporates an ambitious concept of security between States based on a foundation of shared values, agreed commitments and the fundamental dignity of the individual. Within this context, the OSCE Field Operations in the region are pivotal for promoting democratic institution-building and regional stability.

The positive climate of political consensus on major reforms in Albania has bolstered political stability. It is imperative to maintain this trend and continue to implement key reforms through consensus-building. Albania has made tangible progress over the past 18 years, but many challenges lie ahead: Judiciary reforms and the election process must meet OSCE standards. And Albania needs to find the courage and determination to fight corruption, to effectively protect human and minority rights and to further strengthen the independence of institutions and the rule of law.

In its pursuit of these endeavors, Albania has the firm and active support of the OSCE Presence here; a Presence that is doing vital work in a number of key fields. Because progress on the path towards the Euroatlantic family requires progress in legislative and judicial reform, property reform, electoral reform. Progress in regional administrative reform, parliamentary capacity-building, anti-trafficking and anti-corruption. Progress in media development, promotion of good governance, the development of civil society and police assistance.

So Greece's support for Albania is now two-fold and redoubled. Our 2009 OSCE Chairmanship will benefit the Western Balkans as a whole, as well as Albania specifically. Along these lines, in fact, the Greek OSCE Chairmanship decided to appoint Albania as the host country of the second preparatory part of the 17th Economic and Environmental Forum, expressing its conviction that this chance is ideal for Albania to prove its readiness and commitment to undertake such task. For Greece it would be a great success if by the end of the year – by the end of the Greek Chairmanship - our neighborhood were a more prosperous and more stable European region. Beyond that, however, Albania can count, as always, on Greece's firm and consistent political and economic support.

Greece is one of the top foreign investors in the country, contributing significantly to economic development. But Albania's development ultimately lies within a Euroatlantic framework. The Hellenic Parliament will soon be ratifying Albania's NATO membership and recently ratified its Stabilization and Association Agreement

with the EU. Above all, the governments and peoples of Greece and Albania have a rare partnership; a partnership with roots in history and bonds as real today as the dynamic ethnic Greek minority in Albania and the ever-more prosperous Albanian immigrants in Greece. It is through this partnership that we – Greece and Albania – can emerge together into our common European future.