

Albanian Daily News

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"IS THIS A SERIOUS COUNTRY?"

Lu: Balili Case, A Major Failure!



US Ambassador's strong message at Ombudsman's annual conference for human rights: "If Albania cannot catch a drug dealer, how will it go after other big fish? Who will want to work with you?"

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DAY'S BRIEFING



US Senior Official in Tirana

Mathew Palmer, US official from the State Department met with Rama and Basha separately.

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EU Integration Not to Be Used for Campaign

National Integration Council chairwoman Majlinda Bregu invited political parties to reach compromise and meet obligations for EU accession.

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Medallion of Gratitude for TAP

French State Secretary for European Affairs Desir expressed the interest of the French govt.

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City Hall to Ease Tax Procedures for Businesses

From 1 January 2017, the majority of requests and complaints online will be handled in 15 days. Time of registering new business to be halved.

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EXCLUSIVE / SWISS AMBASSADOR GRAF

Remove Corrupt Officials

There is positive perception on justice reform, but Albania must build on this momentum, said Kristoph Graf



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KODHELI AT ALBANIAN SECURITY FORUM

Not Immune to Religious Radicalism

The Defense Minister underlined that Albania has aligned with NATO in the fight against terrorism. Forum focused on the current challenges of cyber security



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GOVERNMENT CONFIRMS

Year-end Bonus to Pensioners Okayed

Some 643,000 pensioners will receive a reward of Lek 6,000. Persons with disabilities and families with economic aid to benefit too

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MINISTER FELAJ

No Voting Rights For Convicts? DP Proposal

BY DARINA TANUSHI

Minister of State for Relations with Parliament, Ermonela Felaj explained that the opposition proposed the suspension of voting rights of convicted felons who have committed serious criminal offenses and who have been convicted by a final court decision. In an interview for Daily "Gazeta Shqiptare," Felaj stated that there won't be many prisoners exempted from the voters' list, but this will be assessed by the authorities.

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EXCLUSIVE SWISS AMBASSADOR CHRISTOPH GRAF

Corrupt Offic

There is positive perception on justice reform and Albania must build on this momentum, said Swiss Ambassador to Tirana. He also noted that the cannabis issue is of great concern

BY GENC MLLOJA, FOTO LSA

Switzerland and Albania enjoy excellent political and diplomatic relations, but the potential in the economic cooperation has not yet been fully exploited. This was the opinion expressed by the Swiss Ambassador to Albania, Christoph Graf in an exclusive interview with Albanian Daily News during which he noted that trade exchanges remained modest, while Swiss firms had told him that investing in Albania was still risky and corruption remained a problem.

"Investors require better rule of law, security in property and predictability. Sectors with higher potential are tourism and agriculture. Here too there are preconditions for investments: there needs to be a better waste management and protection of natural resources, e.g. protected areas for mountain tourism," the Ambassador said, adding that Swiss development cooperation was engaged in improving waste management as well as in creating market opportunities for some Albanian products in Switzerland.

Asked on the thorny issue of the judiciary, Mr. Graf had observed that Albanian citizens were very much in favor of the justice reform. "They want honest judges and prosecutors, less corruption, more transparency," he said, calling on politicians to support a fast and solid implementation.

On the other hand, the Ambassador noted that the cannabis issue was of great concern since it was linked to organized crime and damaged the image of Albania which has repercussions on economic development.

The Ambassador revealed that his wife and he enjoyed hiking, at the coastline and in the mountains and he had noticed similarities with Switzerland, like the mountainous landscape. But he could not help to remark that it was very important



to protect those areas and increase their potential. "I repeat: I would like to encounter less waste on the beach and in nature."

"I am very well received by Albanians everywhere I go to. The reputation of friendliness and hospitality is real," Ambassador Christoph Graf said in the following interview:

- Mr. Ambassador a few days ago you signed an agreement to provide 500,000 Swiss Francs to further consolidate the territorial and administrative reform in Albania. The Swiss contribution is a continuation of a previous financial contribution of 700,000 Swiss Francs during the first phase of the STAR project (Support to Territorial and Administrative Reform). Could you please elaborate more on the targets of the project and which is, according to you, its importance for Albania?

-The project aims at strengthening municipal administration to provide better services to the citizens. The Swiss Government fosters since many years local governance in Albania. Democracy starts at local level; that is a conviction of a Swiss mind. Albania has made in this area a bold and positive step with the Territorial and Administrative reform. It made a step towards decentralization; it decentralized various functions such as primary education, irrigation, fire brigade etc. to municipalities. How-

ever, many challenges such as the rural-urban divide in the now bigger municipalities or the need to increase local revenue collection remain. Real decentralization of power goes along with transferring sufficient resources to the municipal level. This is what we seek to support, together with other international partners and the Government of Albania.

- As a matter of fact, Switzerland has been generous providing help for other projects in Albania. Which are some of them and in which fields are they earmarked?

- Switzerland's support to Albania amounts to about 20 Million Euro per year. It has been on a gradually increasing trend, honoring the reform efforts of the Albanian Government. The aim is to accelerate

Albanians want honest judges and prosecutors, less corruption, more transparency. In a developed democracy responsible politicians follow the will of the people



Corrupt Officials Must Be Removed

Albania's integration towards the European Union. An important area of assistance is youth employment through vocational skills development. A new project "Skills4Jobs" has been launched in 2016 to improve the quality of vocational education. It is encouraging that enrollment in vocational schools has increased by 30 %. This is one way to address youth unemployment; it deserves more support.

Another sector where Swiss funds and expertise are provided is energy and infrastructure. The investment in the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) - a Swiss based company has drawn also a 6 million Euro grant from the Swiss government to help Albania benefit more from this strategic project. In addition, Swiss funding enabled full running and drinking water for 175,000 citizens in Lezhë and Shkodër in the last couple of years. 6 more cities will receive such support in the coming years.

- The political relations between Albania and Switzerland are described as excellent by both governments. Does this political atmosphere match the economic cooperation between the two countries in such fields like trade exchanges, investments, tourism etc?

-Yes, Switzerland and Albania enjoy excellent political and diplomatic relations. The recent visit of the Head of Swiss Parliament, Christa Markwalder, to Albania confirmed this. Moreover, three Albanian ministers - Gjermeni, Klosi, and Panariti - visited Switzerland during the last year. Our bilateral relations are focused on development cooperation. Trade exchanges remain modest; the potential is not yet fully exploited. Swiss firms tell me that investing in



Albania is still risky and corruption remains a problem. Investors require better rule of law, security in property and predictability. Sectors with higher potential are tourism and agriculture. Here too there are preconditions for investments: there needs to be a better waste management and protection of natural resources, e.g. protected areas for mountain tourism. Swiss development cooperation is engaged in improving waste management as well as in creating market opportunities for some Albanian products in Switzerland.

- Your Excellency, it has been reported on a new immigration policy by your government. How are Albanians,

who reside in your country, affected by this?

- In fact there is no new immigration policy in preparation. Switzerland is part of Schengen. In the last years we had several popular votes on migration questions that triggered debates in Switzerland. They do not directly affect Albanians residing in Switzerland. The main discussion focuses on Switzerland's relations with the EU and regarding the free movement of persons. Currently swift measures and fast procedures are in place to deal with asylum seekers. Albania is considered since many years as a safe country; hence Albanians do not qualify as asylum seekers.

- The ongoing justice reform in Albania is considered by the international partners, including your country, as a must to fight corruption and organized crime in this Balkan country. What is your opinion on what is happening on this endeavor?

- I observe that Albanian citizens are very much in favor of the justice reform. They want honest judges and prosecutors, less corruption, more transparency. In a developed democracy responsible politicians follow the will of the people. I encourage citizens to express their opinions and demand a swift implementation of the reform and the related laws. Politicians would do well

to support a fast and solid implementation. In this context a proper and robust vetting of public officials is a key. From talking to businessmen and citizens it is clear that expectations are high on the justice reform. There is still a positive perception that corrupt officials will be removed. It is high time and important to build on this hope, positive expectations and momentum. Of course the cannabis issue is of great concern since it is linked to organized crime and damages the image of Albania which has repercussions on economic development.

- What is your opinion on the role of Albania at regional level, and how do you see the steps undertaken for the further cooperation between Albania and Serbia?

- In the regional context my Government considers Albania together with Serbia as good performers. We note good progress in relations with Serbia in the last two years. Switzerland - alongside with the EU - views Albania's role in the region as moderating and constructive. One important step was the decision to establish the Western Balkan Fund Secretariat and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans in Tirana. Swiss foreign policy and development assistance actively support regional cooperation in the Balkans,

not only in the political, but also in economic, cultural and scientific areas.

- Mr. Ambassador, you have been in Albania for some time now. Have you traveled across this country, and what are your impressions on the places you have visited and Albanians, their culture, customs, history, hospitality?

- I am very well received by Albanians everywhere I go to. The reputation of friendliness and hospitality is real. Together with my wife I enjoy hiking, at the coastline and in the mountains. I notice similarities with Switzerland, like the mountainous landscape, and I feel at home. There is so much potential for wild spots like Valbona or Theth. It is very important to protect these areas and increase their potential. However, I repeat: I would like to encounter less waste on the beach and in nature.

Another impressive development is the increasing interest of Albanians to deal with the recent communist past. Historical sites like Bunkart 1 and 2, and also Spaç, are important testimonies of the past. I am pleased to see many Albanians who want to discover and learn more about their history, particularly young visitors. It is crucial for a society to develop a collective and not only an individual, family-related history of the recent past. ■

