

State of Affairs in Europe and the Potential Implications on the EU and the Enlargement

The Albanian Institute for International Studies (AIIS) held today (15.March.2016) the second series of the Europe Forum of this year. The central topic of the Forum's talk was 'The State of Affairs in Europe and the Potential Implications on the EU and the Enlargement'. The topic was presented by H.E. Mr. Alberto Cutillo, ambassador of the Republic of Italy. His Excellency presented a thorough and solid perspective of the Republic of Italy on the main pressing concerns of the current situation in the EU, which are related to the economic crisis, migration and Brexit (the potential opting out of Britain from the EU in the aftermath of the June 2016 referendum). The Executive Director of AIIS, Mr. Albert Rakipi in his introductory remarks emphasized that EU integration is a mechanism to transform our society and our economy as well as increase the level of cooperation and solidarity across the EU. Among the main issues discussed and mentioned by Italian Ambassador were the prospective negotiations of Albania with the EU and the challenges that Albania faces. Given that the year 2016 constitutes the 60th anniversary year for the foundation of the EU, since the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, His Excellency addressed the potential ways the EU could move forward to its initial aim of an ever closer Union. The talk of Mr. Ambassador Alberto Cutillo raised a number of important issues and questions from the audience as well.

Regarding the European economic crisis, the Ambassador emphasized that there has been a strong effort at the EU level to address the economic crisis. However, there are not yet clear and definite answers. Most of the EU countries, even those that have high GDP are facing high unemployment rates, low investment and fiscal policies based on austerity. The Greek crisis has not been completely addressed and still some degree of uncertainty remains. Although the migration and the current refugee flow into the EU has been of a larger scale than expected the EU, the Italian Ambassador states, is for the first time moving towards a positive evolution in its internal dynamics that is related to the external management of the EU borders. For the first time, the management of the external national borders shall become an EU matter. Key to the solution of the migration issue in the EU, according to Mr. Alberto Cutillo is the solidarity principle. He reinstated that more efforts should be put to implement the solidarity principle across the member states of the EU. Initially as Mr. Ambassador stated during the talk, the migration problem was considered as an Italian problem while now it has become a European issue. The cooperation of the EU with Turkey is considered as crucial in the management of the migration crisis. However, it is a quite positive development that the EU in a short time span managed to establish and implement new strategies and policies with regard to the common migration policy such as the relocation mechanism. On the other hand, Ambassador Cutillo praised the decision of the Albanian government not to put physical barriers in the Albanian national borders has some of the countries in the region have done to prevent the flow of the migrants. Mr. Alberto Cutillo mentioned during the talk that Albania does not possess sufficient capacities to welcome the refugees.

The possible exit of Britain from the EU (Brexit) constituted an important part of the Ambassador's talk. Britain is considered to be a key member of the EU. Currently, the EU leaders have agreed to grant UK a different status within the EU. However, Mr. Alberto Cutillo emphasized that in case the camp that supports the final exit of the UK from the EU wins the June 2016 referendum, and then the EU enters into uncharted territories. The potential exit of Britain can create certain concerns that relate to sovereignty, economic governance and free movement. Other EU members might require similar accommodation of their concerns as in the UK case.

With regard to the EU membership of Albania, Mr. Ambassador reiterated that the road towards full membership is a long one. It requires the fulfillment not only of the political criteria to open the negotiations such as the judiciary reform, fight against corruption, organized crime and an independent public administration, but also a consensus among all the EU member states to grant a membership status. Mr. Ambassador mentioned that in the current situation there are two main ideas in the EU shared by different states. Some states are not satisfied with the current situation of the EU and they have a different idea of what an ever closer Union means, while there other European states like Western Balkan states that want to join. Mr. Cutillo indicated that the EU might develop into the direction of concentrated circles and multiple speeds of integration, in which one small circle moves towards a deepening of the integration and a larger circle has a looser integration. In case this happens, the enlargement according to the personal opinion of Mr. Ambassador becomes easier. However, the 60th Anniversary of the EU is a remarkable moment to reflect on the prospective future of the EU and its policies.