

Europe in the World 2018, Final Exam Project

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Most likely no to an opening of membership negotiations with Albania

At the end of June, the EU member states will decide whether they want to open membership negotiations with Albania. Since Denmark, France, and the Netherlands all have expressed it's not the right time for EU enlargement it will most likely be a thumbs down to the western Balkan country which still needs to improve much before living up to all criteria. But there are also reasons why a green light to Albania could be a good idea



Albania hopes to become a member of the European Union – but there is a long way to go yet. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

By Jesper Gynther

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Albanian government leader is busy these days trying to convince his European colleagues that it is a good idea to open EU membership negotiations with the western Balkan country.

The European Council will decide during its summit on the 28th and 29th of June – but there is still some lobbying to be done before especially three member states are convinced.

While Poland, Austria, and Bulgaria all have declared that they support the opening of the negotiations, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands are not so fond of the idea.

"No, I can say with certainty I will not support that initiative. We should be honest about that issue," said Danish Prime Minister Lars Rasmussen in May after EU's summit in the Bulgarian capital of Sofia.

Same signals came from the French President Macron who stated: "I am not in favor of moving toward enlargement before having all the necessary certainty and before having made a real reform to allow a deepening and better functioning of the European Union."

Since all member states have to agree before the membership negotiations can begin it looks like it is going to be a decline from the European Council.

A part of the problem for Albania seems to be timing. A Brexit-deal is still not made, and the stability of the Euro is under pressure after Italy recently elected a Eurosceptic government. Therefore, the European Union is more concerned with keeping the family together rather than expanding it.

That is also the assessment from the Albanian professor of Sociology and Public Policies, Kosta Barjaba, who believes that Albania is ready to join the EU.

"But the EU is not ready to accept Albania and countries like Albania," says professor Barjaba who is also the senior policy advisor for the Albanian minister of health.

However, it is not just a matter of right timing. Another key reason for delaying membership negotiations is that Albania still needs to improve much when it comes to living up to the membership criteria – especially when it comes to eliminating corruption and organized crime.

The big fish still needs to be caught

The Netherlands has listed the problems with corruption and organized crimes as the main reason why they are skeptical of opening membership negotiations with Albania.

The Albanian television channel Tv Klan has provided a Dutch government document on the assessment of the 2018 enlargement package which states that the Netherlands is particularly concerned about the number of sentences which remains low.

The document states: "*It is essential that Albania continues to work on achieving concrete results, pursue, investigate and punish organized crime and corruption at all levels. (...) Only when the conditions set by the Commission are met the accession negotiations can be opened*".

There are in total five key priorities that the commission has named as conditions for opening membership negotiations: justice reform, public administration reform, protection of human rights, and the fight against corruption and organized crime.

The Commission believes Albania has advanced enough in those areas to open membership negotiations and therefore recommended it on the 17th of April.

But according to a senior official at the EU delegation to Albania, the recommendation is not the same as saying that there is no more room for improvement – especially when it comes to corruption and organized crime.

The delegation makes an annual report about the country's progress and in the most recent one from April – which the commission based the recommendation on – it is stated that Albania is doing better regarding investigation and conviction of mid-level officials or politicians.

But there is still a lack of track record concerning high-level criminality and corruption which until now has remained quite protected.

"We all use this 'big fish' metaphor. And we are waiting for the big fish to be caught," says the senior official who is referring to the fact that Albania is well-known for being a cannabis-producing country with an influential mafia who reportedly has ties in the government top.

The judges don't feel like kings anymore

When it comes to justice reform, public administration reform, and protection of human rights, the delegation has seen vast improvements since Albania applied for EU membership in 2009 and also after it became an EU candidate country in 2014.

For example, there are no issues of non-respect of religious minorities which is very unusual for the Balkan region which has a history of religious conflict as late as in the 1990s with the Kosovo war.

But it is in the justice system where the most significant thing happened in recent years. Two years ago, Albania introduced a vetting process of the judges which was intended to "clean the system".

Judges now have to document that they have the right professional credentials to work as a judge and that they have moral integrity which includes that they have to justify what they own – with the intent to get rid of corrupted judges.

The reform has already worked as several judges decided to resign because they didn't want to enter the vetting process and others have been removed from their positions later on.

"The judges feel they are not kings anymore. They were very, very powerful and were not accountable to anybody. But they cannot do what they had in mind anymore," says professor Barjaba who believes the justice reform is the most substantial achievement by the current government.

To let them in or not – that is the question

Even though Albania still needs to improve on all five priorities to reach the same level as the current member states, the EU delegation to Albania believes the country is on the right track and has the capacity to start the negotiations which are a heavy process that usually takes a long time.

But there is also another reason why the delegation thinks an opening of membership negotiations could be a good idea.

"Once we open the negotiations, we will have a much stronger leverage to intervene in the country's policy," says the senior official from the EU delegation and adds:

"I think when you open negotiations, it would be much easier for us to push them to reform."

The reasoning from the three countries who are skeptical of opening the negotiations is that the EU shouldn't make the same mistake as with Turkey with whom the EU has negotiated with since 2005 with no prospect of a solution.

Instead, the EU should wait to open the negotiations until the candidate country has fully met all criteria.

"But I think this will take too long because nobody is perfect. If we examine all the parameters of Malta or some other countries we will find something wrong because there is no EU member country which is perfect," says professor Barjaba who prefers another option where the EU incorporates the candidate countries into the European family and then gradually let them meet the criteria over time.

"In this way, it will take less time for countries like Albania to fully meet the criteria," he says.



The EU already supports Albania financially. For example, they have given money to the reconstruct a small park in Tirana at the Skanderbeg Square. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

The EU has a close eye on the western Balkans

Albania is not the only country who is hoping for future EU membership. Five other western Balkan states – Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia – are also in the pipeline.

Serbia and Montenegro have already entered membership negotiations while Albania – but also Macedonia – is hoping that negotiations will start for them after the European Council's summit at the end of June.

It will probably take many years before any of them joins the union taking into consideration the statements made by the French President Macron about future EU enlargement.

But in general, EU seems to have a new and more prominent focus on the region. The European Commission launched a Strategy for the Western Balkans as late as February this year with the outline that the first round of enlargement could happen by 2025. And the summit in May was the first since 2003 where all the government leaders from the six western Balkans countries were invited, and the primary purpose of the meeting was to strengthen the ties between the EU and the western Balkans.

The EU is interested in the region staying stabilized and that the countries don't find new allies in Russia, Turkey, or China. That is the assessment from Balkan-expert Christian Axboe Nielsen who is a lecturer in Eastern European Studies at Aarhus University.

In that regard, he thinks it's essential that the EU keeps luring with the potential of future membership.

"EU enlargement is like a shark. It has to keep swimming even if it sleeps – or else it will die," says he.

Although he won't be surprised if none of them gets into the EU by 2025, he thinks it would be a mistake to wait too long before inviting the countries to join the European family.

"The Balkans is not an area you can put on autopilot. Because if you do, then they will drive into the ditch, break down, or start driving the wrong direction."

Albania hopes for the green light

Even if it will be a "no" at the summit at the end of June, Albania is determined to work for EU membership in the future says the Albanian ambassador in Denmark, Kastrriot Robo.

"We hope that all the EU members will agree to give us the green light to start the negotiation process," he says and adds that Albania is keen to implement all the reforms to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria fully.

"We are convinced that without doing the homework you can't expect to be given the gift of membership of the European Union."

But he also knows that membership is something that may take many years even with a yes at the summit.

"It is not a sprint it is a marathon," he says and explains that Albania has no other wish or alternative than to join the European Union.



The Albanian ambassador I Denmark says Albania has patient and are willing to work hard to become a member of the European Union. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

"During the communism, we have missed Europe – and the world in general – because we were completely isolated. Now we are trying to catch up the gap we had for those many years," he says with reference to the country's history of being a communist dictatorship from 1946-1991.

The ambassador makes it clear that Albania also has a close ally in the US which brought it into NATO in 2008. But Russia and some different countries in the Middle East are also slowly beginning to be present in Albania.

"That is why we need the green light from the member states to go straight on because we are not immune from the other tendencies. They are more strongly present in other parts of our region, but we cannot exclude the possibility that one day they can be stronger in their presence here as well," he says.



Turkey is among the countries who are showing increasing interest in the Balkan region including Albania. For example, Turkey has financed several new mosques in Tirana. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

"As soon as people get an EU passport they will buy a ticket and fly away"

Albania hopes future EU membership can improve the country's economy which is one of Europe's poorest. But at the same time, they also fear joining the EU may lead to mass emigration when people get the right to live and work in other member states – and with a population that currently is ranked secondly in the world for willingness to emigrate there could be cause for concern



"Hi, mum. I am moving – to another country," may be a message many Albanian mothers will receive in the future if Albania becomes a member of the European Union. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

By Jesper Gynther

When "Toni" landed a big contract for his father's construction company to restore the main road in his hometown he was happy. But when the project ended, and the payment came from the municipality, the smile faded a bit.

"You should be able to take a vacation after a deal like that. But here in Albania we only work to survive," says Toni who also works as a construction engineer for the local municipality.

Because he is afraid, he will lose this job if his identity is revealed we are only publishing his nickname.

His monthly salary at the municipality is around 400 euros a month which is slightly higher than the average wage for a worker in the private sector in Albania. It doesn't allow Toni to afford an apartment on his own, so he still lives with his parents at the age of 29.

Therefore, he has made a decision. He will leave Albania and seek fortune somewhere else. Currently, he is trying to convert his diploma in engineering to be able to work in Denmark.

"The reason why I think I am going to leave Albania is very simple: things here are not going in a good way with lifestyle and work. I think it's many times better for my future family and me to work and live in an EU-country," he says.

Emigration is a phenomenon Albania knows very well. Toni is far from the only one who is planning to leave the country, and there will probably be even more like him if Albania succeeds in becoming part of the European Union. Emigration is, therefore, looking to be one of the main issues the western Balkan country has to deal with in the future.



Renovating a road doesn't necessarily pay well in Albania. Albania, May 2018. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

Over half of the population want to emigrate

That many Albanians want to leave their homeland became even more evident in June last year when [Gallup published the results of a survey](#) that showed that 56 % of Albanians would like to emigrate. That puts Albania on a tied second place in the world with Haiti and only behind Sierra Leone.

It is not only Europe which is a popular destination for the emigrating Albanians. The US is also attractive with a [record high number of Albanians](#) who tried their "American Dream" luck in late 2017 through the US diversity visa lottery registering. In total, there were 367,000 aspirant migrants from Albania which is about 13 percent of the country's current 2.8 million resident population.

But since it is – literally – a lottery, not everyone will get the chance to get to the US. But if Albania becomes part of the EU, then everyone would have the right to move to another member state to work.

That is a big part of the reason why almost every Albanian supports future EU membership and that there are no Eurosceptic parties in Albania explains Dr. Armando Hysa, an Albanian ethnologist with a Ph.D. in Albanian Studies from University College London.

"You will not find any Albanian government in the last 25 years that has not declared EU integration as a top one priority. A step closer to the EU means the biggest success for our government," says Dr. Hysa.

But there are also people who are worried about the prospect of free movement.



Aulon Harizaj is one of the people who are worried about emigration from Albania. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

"I am afraid it will create an emigration crisis because as soon as people get an EU passport they will buy a ticket, fly away, and try to live abroad," says 30-year-old Aulon Harizaj from Vlorë who works as a civil engineer in Albania but previously has worked abroad in both Greece, Italy, and Finland.

"In the meantime, I am a bit bitter, hopeful, and worried for the future. I hope for the best, but it is hard to predict," he says.

Another worried Albanian is Serena Leka who currently lives in Denmark and works at Aarhus University as a project coordinator at the Science and Technology Faculty. Even though EU membership would eliminate her worries about getting her work permit renewed she is scared of what would happen if – or when – Albania joins the EU.

"I know it's not fair to say, but I'm so much afraid of how many people are going to stay in the country afterward if we get the European acceptance," says Leka who gets emails from Albanian students looking for advice on how to come to Denmark every second week.

She understands why people want to leave as she did herself in 2015.

"I think it is just some loss of belief and trust in the system and people have been giving up. So now they don't want to take the extra mile and try to change something in the country. They prefer leaving and starting from scratch somewhere else," she says.



EU membership would make it much easier for Serena Leka to stay in Denmark – but at the same time, she also fears that more people will do like her and emigrate if Albania joins the union. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

Albanian ambassador: People have already left

Staying out of the EU is not a solution says the Albanian ambassador in Denmark, Kastriot Robo.

He points out that Albania already has experienced mass emigration. Thousands of people left the country after the former communist rule collapsed in 1991 and approximately one-third of the country's citizens now live abroad with over half a million in both Italy and Greece.

And there are still people leaving the country. Alone from 2013-2017 [more than 200,000 people left](#) – this time with more people seeking to the US, Canada, the UK, and Germany. And the mass emigration has happened even though the Albanians aren't EU citizens yet.

The ambassador admits that joining the EU will mean that some will choose to move to other member states as it happened in Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia and many other countries when they entered the EU.

"But we are not afraid. We are focused on developing our country. If we develop our country then for sure people will stay and give their contribution to their homeland," he says.

According to [Institute of Statistics](#), Albania's annual growth rate was around four percent last year,

and it is expected to be the same in 2018. The unemployment rate in 2017 was at 13,7 percent while youth unemployment was at 25,9 percent with both rates consistently falling since 2014.

The average wages are also growing each year and are now at 481 euros per month in the public sector and 382 euros in the private sector while the minimum wage is 187 euros per month.

But since the costs of living in Albania is one of the lowest in Europe the actual value of the wages are higher than the numbers show.

“The prospects of finding a job and creating a life in Albania are increasing. Also for young people. So they have no reason for leaving the country,” Robo says.

In fact, according to the ambassador, Albania is beginning to see a circle of migration with many returning from Italy and Greece to live in their homeland. He thinks joining the EU will only strengthen this tendency and gives the example of Poland which is now beginning to see people return because EU membership has helped the country grow its economy and make the wages higher.

Dr. Hysa also thinks to join the EU, in the end, will be a better option for Albania than staying out.

“Otherwise this will just go on and on, and every five years there will be another wave of migrants,” she says and adds that there are still people in Albania who believe things will improve.

The (only) ones who want to stay

20-year-old Birgit Rosi and 21-year-old Enkelejda Hyka are two of those who believe in a future for Albania – and also wants to be a part of it.

They both study administration in social policy at the Faculty of Social Sciences in Tirana and are on their third year. Once they graduate, they want to stay in Albania and help build it up – despite knowing that most of their friends want to leave the country.

“Yes we are a part of the small number of people who want to stay here and try to make something in our place,” says Rosi.

“Even though we would love to have experiences outside and study or something. But we would want to come back,” adds Hyka.



Enkelejda Hyka and Birgit Rosi are two of the few young ones who want to stay in Albania. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

Besides studying together, they also do voluntary work at the NGO 'Dev Aid Organisation'. Currently, they are involved in a project that is meant to raise awareness about Albania's process into European integration.

The next step will be to go to universities in Tirana and talk with the students about pros and cons of joining the EU. They will also share their thoughts about staying in Albania – although they know the reactions probably will be disbelief.

It is not just patriotism or to have a good feeling about doing something for their country that has made them decide to bet on a future in Albania.

"It is something I do for myself. This is the place I was born and raised, and there is no other place I can feel this good," says Hyka and Rosi adds:

"The people that complain that the country is not good are the same people that do nothing to change it. And if you ask them what you are doing to change it, they say: "I am leaving."

"So that is kind of sad."

Edi Rama: an artist and a bully – and maybe the man who will get Albania closer to the EU

Albania's prime minister Edi Rama is an unusual and controversial leader. He used to be an artist, now he is a politician, and in the future, he hopes to bring Albania closer to EU membership. But he is also known for being a bully against his opponents who at the moment are demonstrating for his resignation because his government is accused of having ties to organized crime



Edi Rama is 202 cm, former basketball player on the national team, an artist – and Albania's prime minister since 2013. Photo credit: [Flickr](#), Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff

By Jesper Gynther

In April he visited Berlin to meet with Chancellor Merkel, in May it was Paris and President Macron's turn, and on the 4th of June, he had invited the Bulgarian prime minister – who holds the Presidency of the Council of the European Union – to come to Tirana.

Albania's prime minister Edi Rama has been busy the last couple of months campaigning for the possible opening of EU membership negotiations something which will be decided at the end of June.

EU membership is a dream for Albania and a declared goal for Rama's socialist government which came to power in 2013 taking over from the Democrats. His government again took the victory at the 2017 elections – this time with a majority-win to the Socialist Party who won 74 of the 140 seats in the Parliament.

That was the strongest electoral win in terms of seats since the elections in 1997 where the Socialist Party won a landslide victory in the turmoil of the infamous pyramid scandal that led to the resignation of the former government.

Rama can, therefore, be seen as the most powerful Prime Minister Albania has had in the last two decades. But power in itself is not the primary aim for Rama according to Anders Byriel who is the Albanian consul in Aarhus/Ebeltoft.

"I see him as the best kind of politician," says Byriel and elaborates:

"Because it's very unusual to meet a human who obviously is not doing it to create power and wealth for himself but commits to making a better society. And I think the Albanian people have seen this too."

Rama's visions for Albania are clear, says Kosta Barjaba, professor of Sociology and Public Policies, and senior policy advisor to the minister of health. He wants Albania to become part of the European Union and be a place where people want to stay. And he also wants Albanians to grow as people.

"He wants Albanians to become the ideal Albanians that he has constructed in his mind. But it is not easy," says Barjaba.

Artist and bully

Initially, it was something entirely different than political visions that Rama had constructed in his mind. His first passion was art.

He started painting in his childhood and was later enrolled to the Academy of Arts in Tirana. After graduating, he worked at the academy as an instructor before emigrating to France in 1994 where he tried to make a career as a painter.

He exhibited his works at several art galleries together with his former student Anri Sala, before returning to Albania in 1998 where the newly elected socialist government offered him a cabinet position. And from there on his political career began which first led him to be a minister, then mayor of Tirana and finally prime minister of Albania.

German artist Thomas Demand knows Edi Rama through Sala, and he describes Rama's art as "very playful and bold".



After Edi Rama became mayor of Tirana, the capital has become known for being a place of art. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

Demand has later helped Rama on a project to transform the President's Palace into a Democratic House. A project that was hard saying no to for Demand and the others involved.

"Somehow he also managed to convince us to do everything for free, as he is intoxicating in his enthusiasm. Everyone left poorer but happier," tells Demand in an email.

Rama also made a big impression on Serena Leka who met him for the first time when she was age 9 or 10.

"At that time he was I guess mayor of Tirana. And he hugged me and held me in his arms," says Leka who met him again when he became prime minister.

This time she was protesting against his government, and she left the meetings with him thinking he has an interesting charisma, but also that he is a bit of a bully.

"He can become very sarcastic I can say. But only if you have given him reason to."

"I actually don't have a negative opinion of him," she says.

Allegations of ties with organized crime

But there are others who are more negative towards the prime minister and his government. During his time in the prime minister's office, he has fought a tough fight with the opposition which threatened to boycott the last national election in 2017.

And on the 24th of May this year, the opposition [boycotted a resolution expressing support for the launch of negotiations on joining the European Union which Rama called](#) “an unparalleled act of historic infidelity to the country”.

The reason why the opposition boycotted the resolution is that they accuse the minister of internal affairs of having links to organized crime and therefore they are calling for the government's resignation [while demonstrating in the streets of Tirana](#).

The government, however, denies the allegations and refuses to resign.

So everything is not all sunshine for the Albanian Prime Minister who may have won a big win at the latest election but the voter turnout was only at 46 percent – the lowest in many years – so he doesn't have support from all Albanians.

And with the allegations of links to organized crime, Rama's government is maybe more pressured than ever. Even more, because the former minister of internal affairs also had to resign because of allegations of links to organized crime.

“It is not so easy to find in other countries two ministers who have their closest family members in top positions of the mafia. And those ministers are ministers of internal affairs who control the police. That means that the state is heavily involved in that,” says Dr. Armanda Hysa who has a Ph.D. in Albanian Studies from University College London.

She likes the prime minister's personality but is not fond of his politics.

“Now we have five years of Edi Rama – not the first year – and what do we have? We have beautiful buildings, we have nice city centers that already started from previous governments. And what else? No road improvements, no infrastructure improvements, no national programs,” she says and adds:

“Rama has beautiful words and a great sense of humor. If I want to laugh, I just open the tv and listen to him. But he is not really a good prime minister. That is my opinion of him.”

Time will tell if Rama's government will survive the current turbulence – or if the government succeeds in an opening of EU membership negotiations. But it is certain that Rama will not be the prime minister who eventually gets Albania into the EU.

In an interview with [Forbes from the 17th of April](#), he said that EU accession would take more time than what he wants to spend in politics. What he intends to do after retiring from politics might be a bit surprising for a prime minister – but maybe not for an artist.

"Maybe something with cooking. I like to cook," was his answer to Forbes.

Info: Edi Rama

Born on the 4th of July 1964 and grew up in Tirana as the son of a sculptor who had created many statues of Albania's communist dictator Enver Hoxha. Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports 1998-2000. Mayor of Tirana 2000-2011. Awarded World Best Mayor in 2004 after earning international recognition for repainting the facades of many Soviet-style, demolishing buildings in the city. Prime minister of Albania 2013-.



One of the old buildings that Rama repainted during his time as mayor of Tirana. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

No need for a burqa ban in Albania

Albania might be the first member of the European Union which predominantly has a Muslim population. The Muslim Albanians, however, are not much different from the average Dane. Many of them also drink alcohol, eat pork, and hardly ever goes to the religious ceremonies – and women wearing scarfs are probably often more seen in Denmark than in the Mediterranean country



It is more usual that women wear a cap than a scarf in Albania. From Berat, Albania, May 2018. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

By Jesper Gynther

Walking down the streets of Tirana you have to be patient to spot a woman who covers her hair with a scarf. Instead, you will see many young women wearing jeans and maybe also t-shirts with messages like “your boyfriend gave me this shirt” or “it is never too late” written over the breasts.

In the many cafés you will see young people drinking tiny caffé Americano during the day, but when the evening comes it is beer – maybe even Tuborg – that gets served. And when Albanians

eat dinner, which usually cost around five euros in a restaurant, they will eat pork which is found in many local dishes.

The only time, you realize that you are in a country where the population is predominantly Muslim is when the adhan is called out from the speakers at the mosques. But no one stops what they are doing and start to pray. Not even if it is Friday or Ramadan.

"We have a saying in Albania which is really good. We say that our religion is Albania," says 21-year-old Ermal Ndrek from Fier who lives in Tirana and study civil engineering.

[A census from 2011](#) by Institute of statistics showed that 58,79 percent of Albania's 2.8 million residents declared themselves to be Muslim with the majority being secular Sunnis and a minority being Bektashi Shias. 16,99 percent stated Christianity with Catholics concentrated in northern Albania and Orthodox followers in the south.

Despite having a mixed religious population, Albania has not had the same conflicts as their neighboring countries where religious tension even have led to war as in Kosovo in 1999.

"We don't usually compare our religions. That is a good part of it because we don't usually fight for someone else's ideas," says Ndrek.



Albanians prefer the local drink Raki but are also fond of beer. Tirana park, May 2018. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

Can become the first Muslim country in the EU

Albanians became Muslims during the rule of the Ottoman Empire from 1480-1912 but when Albania became a communist country after the Second World War religion was first curtailed and then outlawed in 1967 – making Albania the first atheist state in the world.

The mosques and churches were destroyed, and only a few were preserved as cultural heritage. First, after the communist rule collapsed in 1991 the ban on religion was lifted.

According to lecturer in Eastern European Studies at Aarhus University, Christian Axboe Nielsen, religion didn't completely disappear during these years. But it did have an impact.

"Like in places of the former Yugoslavia, you can't be under communist rule in 45-50 years without it leaving some traces. One of those traces is an almost complete secularized society," he says.

Albania is now trying to get into the EU and if they succeed it will be the first EU member state with a majority of Muslims. But because Albania is a secularized state and there is no religious tensions within the country, the Albanian ambassador in Denmark, Kastriot Robo, doesn't think religion will be an issue in the negotiations.

"The coexistence of religions is very positive here and is a model also for others countries. Albanians are very moderate and tolerant," he says and mentions that the coexistence of religions was the reason why the [pope chose Albania](#) as his first destination outside Italy when he assumed the position in 2014.



Albanians are known for being progressive Muslims – in many ways. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

No need for a burqa ban

That the Albanian Muslims are a bit different than the general stereotype of Muslims is something you notice very quickly in the Albanian streets, says Hans-Georg Nielsen from Denmark who is the Albanian consul in Copenhagen.

He has a son-in-law that is from Albania and therefore he has visited the country many times. But only a few times has he seen women who are covered entirely.

"There is not a need for a burqa ban," he concludes.



Religion is not something Albanians spend their time on says the Albanian consul in Copenhagen Hans-Georg Nielsen who has visited Albania many times. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

He has also experienced that religion is not something Albanians discuss.

"A driver once told me that he first realized after 20 years that his wife had another religion than him. It is not something they spend their time on. And in the cemeteries they are also lying next to each other regardless of religious belief," he says.

It can sometimes even come as a surprise to the Albanians how much religion is present in other countries in western Europe. That was the case for Xhensila Reci, an Albanian who studies in Denmark and is married to a Dane.

"It has been quite shocking to see so many Muslim communities in Denmark which I didn't experience in Albania. I didn't expect to come to a non-Muslim country and then find a lot of Muslim communities," she says.



Xhensila Reci is herself an atheist but comes from a Muslim Albanian family. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

“The wall is coming down”

While Albania is not a very religious country, it is still a conservative one. In the villages, women are expected to stay at home and not go out.

But in the capital Tirana, it is not like that anymore. Here the women also go to clubs – but it will still take some time before Albanians open themselves entirely.

“Guys who come from other countries they tend to go and dance with girls, but girls here sometimes don't want to approach with other guys. So they keep distance because that is Albanian culture. If we are a group of friends none of our friends get involved with other guys or girls – we stay together,” Ndrek says.

But he does think that the Albanian conservatism is slowly changing.

“Albanians are really nice and good people, but they have this wall that doesn't let anyone approach them. But from time to time the wall is coming down,” he says.



The three Albanians, Ermal Ndrekolli (left), Arnold Kajolli (right), and Kelio Hila (not in the photo), know tourists very well. Together they have made [Skitterz](#) which is a guided tour for tourists who want to experience Tirana's nightlife. The experiences with the tourists have made them realize that Albanians can be a pretty reserved people – but the “wall” is slowly breaking down they say. Photo credit: Jesper Gynther

