***“Enlargement of the EU from the Perspective of the Youth”***

***By Aina Muça***

The "dream" of the Albanian youth has always been the same - being part of the European Union. The students of the 90’s era rose in the largest anti-communist protests against the government in December of the same year, chanting loudly, "We want Albania to be like all of Europe."

Albania has been living the European ideal throughout its whole history. Amid the reign of the National Hero Gjergj Kastriot Skënderbeu, Albanians developed strong ties with Venice and other Western nations.

The integration of Albania into the European Union has been regarded as the most critical national priority, directing the governing agenda of this country, since the demolishment of the communist regime, following the significant democratic developments that overthrew the totalitarian rule.

In June 2014, Albania got the status of an EU candidate nation. Albania was held back from moving on to the next phase of the process for a long time because of the requirements imposed by the European Union for membership.

Now, the start of EU enrollment negotiations is dependent on the full accomplishment of five major goals, including establishing an unbiased government, strengthening the legal system's independence, resistance to corruption, combating organized crime, and protecting human rights. Albania can become a member of the EU if the negotiations and any necessary changes have been completed to the satisfaction of both sides (Albania and the Union).

However, this will be a long process that requires a fundamental transformation of Albania, both in terms of legislation and the improvement of Albanian structures and economy.

In recent decades, Albanian society has undergone significant societal development. Undoubtedly, some of these major changes have to do with youth and the issues that Albanian young face.

The concerns that Albanians encounter year after year are not only those of a global nature that have an impact on the nation's politics and economy but also those related to the ongoing paralysis of decision-making in this country’s society.

Statistically speaking, in 2020, there were 661,365 young people in Albania between the ages of 15 and 29, which equates to 23.2% of the total population. There are 333,435 and 327,930 people in the 15-29 age range, respectively, according to INSTAT (Albanian National Statistical Institute).

The problems that Albanian youth bear typically influence Albanian society as a whole.

The following issues should be emphasized among those that have the greatest impact on this part of the population and their perception as the most important segment of society.

Firstly, there is a large influx of young immigrants. More than 140,000 young people have departed Albania over the past ten years.

Albanians continue to leave the nation in large numbers in quest of better lives overseas. This country will be fully depopulated within the next 70 years due to the high rates of young people leaving it, according to international research, even if INSTAT has not released data on youth immigration.

Furthermore, the high rate of youth unemployment impacts the younger generation tremendously and continues to be a serious issue.

While INSTAT reports a 21.7% youth unemployment rate, a different study estimates that 51% of young people in this nation are unemployed. In 2019, the unemployment rate for young individuals with secondary education was 14.4%, while it was 12.3% for those with a higher degree, according to INSTAT data that sorted it by academic level.

The absence of participation in decision-making and perspective is another typical dilemma.

Numerous polls and research reveal that young Albanians no longer have faith in the nation's institutions, feeling that they are primarily exploited for political ends without the chance to influence or be the focal point of these initiatives.

The government should provide particular attention to Albanian youth as agents of change and as heirs to the European dream.

The power of change is youth. Regardless of political differences, it can unite everyone and influence a nation's future. The nation's integration initiatives should place a high priority on young people since they will be their future leaders, guiding the upcoming generation.

The Albanian youth acknowledges that the legislations imposed by the EU and free mobility will ensure that they are granted the possibility to operate in the labor market in European nations, having a positive impact on the rapid decline of youth unemployment.

By joining the EU, Albania will have access to major European markets, which will encourage the expansion of foreign investments and make it possible for educated and gifted young people to be employed in the enterprises established as a result of these investments.

Having EU membership will ensure Albania’s full integration of its educational system with the modernized teaching methods used by the EU's current members, something crucial to Albanian educational development.

For educated young people working in various fields, the transfer of expertise in science, technology, and medicine will be a fantastic opportunity with a highly favorable impact.

Youthful individuals should be supported and encouraged to exert positive political pressure on the government by calling for the continuation and transparency of the reforms required for integration.

Theodore Roosevelt, the former president of the United States, once said: "We cannot construct the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future". Hopefully, Albania will be able to accomplish that in the future.