

Tirana, November 21st 2006

National Conference Report Albania and EU: Perceptions and Realities

On 21st November 2006, Albanian Institute for International Studies organized at Hotel Tirana International the National Conference “Albania and EU: Perceptions and Realities, 2006”, aiming to publicize to the widest possible audience of the Albanian public the findings of the forth annual survey carried out by AIIS. It presented public perceptions on the European Union represented by five groups of interest public administration (local and central), business, media and NGOs.

Challenges, prospects and perceptions of survey findings about EU, were object of a wide discussion among representatives from the Albanian institutions, the academic society, political representatives, media, NGO’s, diplomatic community, etc. who brought valuable diverse experience and insights to the discussions. The Albanian government was represented by H.E. Arenca Trashani, Minister of Integration, while from the Albanian Parliament H.E. Ilir Meta, head of the Parliamentary Commission on European Integration, addressed the Conference.

Presentation of AIIS Study “Albania and EU – Perceptions & Realities” was held by Ms. Sabina Ymeri, Deputy Director of AIIS. She highlighted some of the most important findings of this annual survey such as the overall result of the 2006’s survey, showing that support for Albania’s EU membership has increased significantly since 2005 from a low point of 83.9 percent in 2005 and 84.9 percent in 2004 to 92.5 percent. She continued pointing out that while the SAA restored support for the country’s EU membership, it did not radically alter perceptions on the challenges and timeframes of the integration process. The majority of those polled support EU membership primarily for economic reasons—they either believe that their own living standards will increase or that the economy in general will benefit from membership. Yet, free movement remains a burning issue with 37 percent justifying their “pro-membership vote” principally because they expect to move freely throughout the EU. Another important finding shows that EU remains the most important strategic partner for Albania while two other organizations, UN and NATO, came second and third respectively. Although Albanians value the EU and EU membership benefits slightly less than before, membership support has risen considerably and the desire to strengthen relations with the EU remains very high. These seemingly contradictory trends are explained by the fact that Albanians see no other option than European Union membership. AIIS Deputy Director Sabina Ymeri continued by pinpointing that as Albanians understand the EU better they remain committed to the European perspective although they express less optimistic about

the speed of the integration process. In the meantime, although serious misperceptions continue, expectations on the length of the process of integration have become more realistic. Regarding the political level, as AIIS Deputy Director presented, Albanians perceive political conditions as much more important than economic ones for the EU integration.

In her remarks, Albanian Minister of Integration, HE Arenca Trashani, underlined the similarity of survey's target groups with those that Ministry of Integration considered the more closely related to the integration process, in an effort to raise the inclusiveness in this process of local public administration (until now not much included in these processes). HE Trashani informed the participants about the work that is being done by the Ministry of Integration, especially in the field of information of specific target groups about costs and benefits from the SAA and the Interim Agreement.

In his welcoming remark Head of the Albanian Parliamentary Commission on European Integration, HE Ilir Meta, addressed the audience observing that there is now in the Albanian public perception a raised level of awareness that integration process is a dependent variable of the political stabilization and of free elections. HE Meta added that it is imperative for Albania, in order to achieve political stability and free elections, to elaborate all necessary institutional and economic reforms. Integration does not represent, according to him, an objective *per se*, but it should be viewed as a development entrepreneurship. It is obvious from the results obtained, HE Ilir Meta said, that respondents had a level of education, since a large number of them could describe SAA as a New Contractual Relationship. From his point of view, the real challenge for Albania's road of European integration relays in its conceptualization as a development entrepreneurship.

The Conference was addressed by Dr. Albert Rakipi, President of AIIS, who highlighted the fact that Albanians have become more aware of the European processes, and the support for Albania's EU membership has increased significantly since 2005 from a low point of 83.9 percent in 2005 and 84.9 percent in 2004 to 92.5 percent this year.

The presentation and remarks by our distinguished guests were followed a lively discussion and debate among participants about the results of the survey and Albania's integration process in large. It is important to notice in this respect the intervention of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Albania, Mr. Alfred Sereqi, who observed that the one-year period between the AIIS surveys might not be the most appropriate period to drive into exact conclusions and measure shifts in public perceptions about EU and Albania's integration. Mr. Sereqi also remarked that the interest groups chosen by AIIS do not represent the overwhelming majority of Albanians. He concluded with a more theoretical evaluation regarding the democratic deficit as an ever ending struggle European Union has to make.