

DONORS' CONFERENCE SPEECH

PRIME MINISTER EDI RAMA

I want to start by saying, very simply, this

Thank you. And please.
Merci. Et s'il vous plait.
Danke. Und bitte schon.
Grazie. Per favore
Tesekkür Ederim. Ve lütfen
Shukran. Afran

Wish I could continue in all your languages to say thank you! And please if I may, in my own language - faleminderit. Dhe ju lutem.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your invaluable support so far.

And please – I speak here for and from the heart of all Albanians - please support us some more. Ju lutem!

Thank you, for accepting the invitation of the President of the Commission to this special donors' conference, for understanding how dark a time this has been for my country.

So yes, please, please help, as we try to recover from damages that go beyond our own human possibilities and rebuild from the savage blow that befell us in the early hours of November 26 last year.

Thank you Ursula, to you personally and to your amazing team, (thank you Charles Michel) for having shown us, from that first moment of shock to this warm comforting moment of such a big gathering now, the soul of the European Union; this wonderful body that has done so much to advance peace and prosperity across a continent historically defined by war; and has given so much help to the country and the region I come from, during three decades of struggle to build democratic states on the ruined foundations that communism and dictatorship left behind for our societies.

You had your own earthquake recently, with Brexit. I was so sad too. How strange it was, coming as I do from a country so desperate to be a part of the EU, to see a great country like the UK decide to leave. How happy would I be if the gorgeous Albanian flag could rise to replace the beautiful British one that has been taken down here in Brussels. But I am not saying please do it, because I know life is not that simple.

What was it John Lennon sang?

'Life is what happens to you when you're busy making other plans.' We were busy. We were making plans, and making progress. Then, the ground shifts, people swallowed up in it, the whole country in shock ... and since then, it has all been about dealing with the aftermath. The other plans have to take a back seat.

Nevertheless, it felt so comforting to discover, in our tragic hour, that we were not alone with our dozens of dead, hundreds of wounded and thousands of homeless, because we had so many great friends coming from the sky, from the sea, from the land; from the region, from the continent and beyond, to be with us and fight with us to save lives, heal wounds, assess damages and now seek to build new paths for the future. Faleminderit.

Thank you, dear friends from Turkey for the pledge you made - as the new European Commission did - right in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake. Thank you, dear friends from the Gulf countries, United States, friends in Asia too, ready to pledge and work together with our European friends for this amazing conference. Thank you dear friends from the neighborhood, the Western Balkans, to be here with me today and witness through your presence and pledges, how much that turbulent region of ours has changed in the last years. And how real is our will to build for our children a totally different place than the one of bloodshed, conflicts, disputes that kept hostage the people of our countries for endless generations. Thank you, dear friends from the United Nations, World Bank, EIB, EBRD, IMF and many more. Faleminderit.

There is no limit to the gratitude I feel to all of you.

The mere fact that you all are here today is heart-warming and emotional for me personally, and I believe for all Albanians, those watching us at home and those who live and work in a lot of your countries, so many of them hoping one day to come back and live in an Albania that is developed, prosperous, truly European as the dream we believe in and fight for every day. For all the help you have given to all of us in that extremely difficult journey - Faleminderit.

So often, we have felt as though we are in a fight for survival. A hundred years ago, as our region emerged from the Balkan wars, and the whole world sought to recover from the war that was supposed to end all wars, it is no exaggeration to say that we faced the risk of annihilation. The many curses of our history stood as obstacles to a better future. The Versailles Conference was a moment of existential threat.

But our friends came good. The United States, France, Switzerland, Turkey, Britain, Italy, all ensured we were given the chance to show we could take our place in the League of Nations.

A hundred years ago, Albania stabilised its borders, affirmed the principles of secularism, established parliamentary rule, challenged ancestral customs in order to shore up democracy, equality and an impartial justice system. And in that League of Nations, uniquely for a Moslem majority country, Albania was represented by a Christian bishop, my predecessor as Prime Minister.

At the dawn of the 1920s, Albania was excited by the idea that a better future was possible and made its efforts to walk towards it. But that first world war did not end all war. The second world war followed, and with it for Albania four and a half decades of the most brutal form of communist dictatorship. This, I might add, in the only country of our continent that had more Jews after the war than before it, thanks to the unbreakable Code of Hospitality and Religious Fraternity, which we proudly cherish as the light of our eyes.

But the curse of history was back, and we were prisoners once more. The North Korea of Europe. We knew there was another world not far away, and we wanted to be part of it. That world was Europe, this Europe, here and now. It was the dream, the ideal, the inspiration, that kept us going and still does. There is more than one reason why we, Albanians, are yet eurofanatics I must say.

And so, forward to 2019, at the eve of 2020, when two grim sores were opened wide. One physical, one political, both combining to leave million of Albanians at home and around the world utterly distraught.

The physical one is the reason we are here, the earthquake of November 26. But even as the first tremors struck, we were still grappling with the consequences of the political earthquake of October 18. That day too was a dark day in our calendar, when the European Council could not decide on the official opening of accession talks with Albania. Believe me, the tremors ran deep into our minds and souls.

We are of course not the only country in the world to face natural disaster, though the earthquake was the deadliest of 2019, anywhere in the world. But we are a small, relatively poor country. Big, rich countries can face disasters on their own, and we have seen many times America and other great countries responding to natural or humanly provoked disasters, and responding stunningly well.

For smaller countries, it is not so easy, though I am hugely proud of how well we coped in the immediate aftermath. Every life lost was a tragedy, but that we managed to keep the death toll at fifty-one was in no small measure down to how well our nation reacted when disaster struck.

Communities rallied round. We saw real courage as people rushed to help their neighbors, disregarding the threat of more tremors. In the most memorable show of unity I have witnessed, we did a remarkable job in incredibly difficult circumstances, pulling people out of the rubble, finding accommodation quickly for everyone without homes, supplying them with food and warm clothes.

But again, without the fantastic rescue teams and the hand of solidarity of many of the countries present here, the death toll and the many wounds would have been far greater. Thank you. Faleminderit.

So now, the dead are buried, and their loved ones mourn, whilst also, as we must, looking to the future. A future made more challenging when we know that 17,000 families were left without homes, thousands of buildings big and small need to be renovated and fortified, critical infrastructure needs to be fixed, cultural and world heritage monuments to be saved.

The final Post-Disaster Report suggests we will need in the order of a billion euros to repair the damage. To rich, big countries, not exactly small change, perhaps, but manageable. Mine is a country of 4.2 million people of whom around a third live and work abroad; we have a GDP of 13.5 billion Euro, average salaries of 420 euro and need to

face a direct damage equivalent of 6.4% of our GDP plus a loss of 1.1% of our GDP. To us, it is a huge sum. We cannot do this on our own. We are short of money, and even more than that, short of time.

So yes, for sure, I am here with a very direct plea. Please help us with the grants and the bearable loans we need to rebuild our shattered homes, communities and confidence. Please meet our suffering with the generosity it needs. We will do all that we can and even more than we can. I ask you to do just what you can, to help. Ju lutem!

And to my friends in the European Union, the help we ask for goes beyond the financial or the immediate. Earthquake or no earthquake, death toll or no death toll, please understand how important to us is the Zagreb Summit on the Western Balkans in the following may, under the chairmanship of our great Croatian friends, and what we hope should bring a green light to walk further in our yet long European journey ahead.

What happened in November may be called an act of God, or the force of nature. We are powerless as they strike. We have no choice but to accept these phenomena and try as best as we can to save as many people as possible and to bring life back to normal as quickly as possible.

The political earthquake we suffered, a month earlier, was man-made. Avoidable. To the families and friends of those fifty-one lost souls, the real earthquake in November is the worst thing ever to happen. But for the country as a whole, the political earthquake in October felt like the curse of our history was striking yet again.

I am not here to blame anyone. I know that the enlargement process is just one of not few issues under discussion within the EU family. A difficult one in the not at all easy times the Union live in. But for us, who had done so much to be ready to move from preparing talks to accession talks, then to be denied that move, was indeed a bodyblow. We were totally gutted, like the wind had been kicked out of us. We felt hurt. Humiliated.

Please, please, understand, and appreciate, the depth of those feelings. They spring from our understanding and appreciation of the good your Union does in the world, and our desire to be part of that. But they spring too from frustration – we did everything that was asked of us, yet the answer was No. All guidelines and directives followed. But the answer was No.

Has there ever been a country preparing for the accession talks that has taken on such a change to our law enforcement and justice system? No. And it's not me saying it, but it's what everyone can read by itself in the documented memory of countries accession talks with the EU. It's clear to me that we did more than others during preparations for talks, not because we are better than they were but because EU became more and more demanding from countries next in the line. This is why that was as though we were driving steadily down the road marked reform, and suddenly that road was reduced to boulders.

I thought long and hard about using the word earthquake to describe both of these awful events from the life of Albania at the end of 2019. I am here after all to ask for your help, and perhaps some might take me amiss on what I have said about the politics. But I feel it is important to spell it out ... for the November earthquake, the price is very clear, and we must try to raise the funds as best we can. For the political earthquake of October, how do you calculate the price of hope that suddenly feels shattered? It is a high price, not measurable in euros or any other currency.

So, two bodyblows, in quick succession. But we are still standing, and still full of hope that we can and we will build that better future. I am really encouraged by the way the Commission has supported us through both earthquakes, the physical and the political. And I am encouraged by both the new methodology proposal France has put forward to address and assess the accession talks in the future and the prompt reaction of the new Commission to make the best out of it, by so creating the conditions for unleashing new positive energies, here in Brussels and back home as well.

So if the end of 2019 brought two bad days for my country, let this day today mark 2020 as a year of reconstruction, solidarity and hope. For Albania and I very much wish for the European Union itself. If Robert Schuman was right and he certainly was, when he declared that "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity", this gathering is by no doubt one of those concrete achievements which create a de facto solidarity.

Allow me to conclude this maybe long parentheses on Albania and Europe, by leaving to all our EU friends here the following note of a very special french, a great political and humanist figure, high level diplomat of the French Republic and visionary founder of the Human Rights Ligue. His name is Justin Godard. Have to switch a moment in french and quote:

"Egoïsme individuel, familial, local, national, c'est toujours l'égoïsme, qui mène au sacrifice du plus faible par le plus

fort. En Albanie, pour la première fois, j'ai senti qu'il y avait, non seulement des êtres, mais des peuples qu'on ne pouvait abandonner, sans honte, à leur faiblesse".

I have to precise that this striking note wasn't written at the end of last year, but 100 years ago in a beautiful book, titled "L'Albanie en 1921" - Albania at 1921.

Whatever you pledge to the Albania at 2020 will be more than matched by our thanks tomorrow, as we set to work on reconstruction, and our friendship for all time. For now, outside the European Union. One day, hopefully, within it. Whatever reforms it takes, we embrace them, because even in dark times like these, perhaps especially in dark times, the European ideal, the European inspiration burn bright.

Dear and precious friends here today,

Big or small, rich or poor, near or afar, we all are just people and you will never ever regret being today's best friends of Albania. We may be small, but we are big of heart. We may be poor, but we are rich in character, and we live according to the principle set out in the first paragraph of our old common law, "The house of the Albanian belongs to God and to the Guest! Any time, all of you, you are welcome to be our guest of honor, from now until the end of times.

Thank you for coming. Thank you for listening. Thank you for your support. Faleminderit.

May God bless you all and all your countries.