

*Speech by His Excellency Mr. Bujar Nishani,
The President of the Republic of Albania
to the Annual Banquet of the Guild of Freemen of the City Of London*

London, December 8th, 2014

Master

Wardens

My Lord Mayor

Mr President

Your Royal Highnesses

Your Serene Highnesses

Governor-General

Your Excellencies

Your Grace

My Lords

Aldermen

Sheriff

Mr Dean

Chief Commoner

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure for the First Lady and I to be part of this august gathering, the Annual Banquet of the Guild of Freemen of the City of London.

I would like to express my thanks to the Master and Court of the Guild of Freemen of the City of London for the very kind invitation to be present here tonight in this historic Guildhall.

I would also like to especially thank Court Assistant Sir Anthony Bailey, a good and longstanding friend of Albania and who first brought to my attention the important work that your Guild undertakes across this ancient city.

I am particularly pleased to represent my country, Albania, and my people, in the heart of the world's leading global financial centre and in the presence of the Lord Mayor and his party.

My visit follows another historic occasion: the Exchange of Civic Freedoms between the City of London and the City of Tirana at Mansion House last year to mark the 100th Anniversary of Albanian Independence.

As part of those celebrations and on 28 November 2012, the statue of our national hero, George Kastrioti Scanderberg, a leading defender of European civilisation and Christianity against the Ottoman Empire, was unveiled in the City of Westminster, and stands today in the heart of London as a symbol of our identity and civilisation and the growing partnership and friendship which exists between the Albanian and British people.

I am the President of a proud and ancient country small in size and fame, a country that until 25 years ago not many had heard of, or very few had ever visited.

I say 25 years ago, as Albania was the last country in Europe to break the iron curtain and to earn the much wanted freedom from one of the most atrocious regimes in the history of mankind, Enver Hoxha's communist regime...

The few who had visited prior to the communist rule were mostly British travellers, historians, scholars and writers, as it happened elsewhere in the world too.

The country was since the early days of the European renaissance a sort of exotic mix, with ancient history and very early human culture mixed with natural beauty and strong human characters who worshiped nature's gods and goddesses and prayed to the "Oath" the very virtue that distinguished Albanians from ancient times till today.

Our culture and tradition, our history and life is built on trust and oath.

We are proud of our ancient Illyrian heritage, later mixed with the Roman and Byzantine empires, as well as five centuries of Ottoman rule; the land where Albanians live is the place where Saint Paul on his way to bring Christianity to Europe blessed himself and gave his first service to this part of the world; a land that produced men of trust brave enough to rescue Jews during the holocaust, making Albania and Albanians a rare case among its neighbours and beyond, a land that has given origin to an extraordinary symbol of humanity, Mother Teresa, a country proud of its inter-religious harmony among its Muslim majority, Orthodox, Catholic communities and other faiths and none.

A country which weeks ago Pope Francis chose as the first country in Europe to officially visit.

We were this unique brand in Europe that only a few writers and poets such as Shakespeare, Lord Byron, Eduard Lear, Benjamin Disraeli, Edith Durham and a few others, many of them British by blood and virtue, managed to visit and leave their writings and impressions on the Land of Eagles, on their culture and traditions...

We won our independence in 1912, much later than many others in our neighbourhood but that also had a price.

It was here in London where in 1913 Albania's administrative borders were recognised and many modern historians believe today that if it wasn't for Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary of the time, probably we would not had an Albanian Independent state today.

The British continued to play a major role in Albania.

King Zog, the architect of the Albanian monarchy, tried to adopt a British administration and build up a monarchy and a state similar to your tried and tested model, although he ultimately failed many years later, owing to the Italian invasion of Albania in 1939.

It was also in London and Buckinghamshire that the King spent part of his wartime exile and long before his royal remains were finally returned from Paris to the land of his birth in 2012 and a State Funeral accorded to him.

In 1990, when the iron curtain fell around eastern block and Europe, Albania remained the last to break free.

It was then the late Prime Minister Baroness Margaret Thatcher and certain distinguished members of the House of Commons who were directly involved in rescuing Albania from communist rule and making it possible for us to join the western world.

Thanks to you, the United Kingdom and our common traditional ally United States, the Albanian's in Kosovo were saved of the worst genocide of the modern times after the holocaust.

Kosovo is today a free and independent state and the Balkans have finally found peace and Albania is a strong supporter of the region's stability and prosperity.

Our relations are strong and solid. We are both people who subscribe to peace, a world free of terrorism and any ideological or religious extremisms.

Albania, thanks again to your support and partnership, is a full member of the world's most important alliance, NATO.

We also work side by side for peace, freedom and rule of international law in many international institutions such as the United Nations, OSCE, Council of Europe and other organisations.

This year in June Albania was granted EU candidate status and we all look forward to join the European Union as a full member.

As was discussed at my earlier Audience with His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales our bilateral cooperation focuses on many areas, from the legal and judiciary system to military, education and economic cooperation.

Big British companies such as Vodafone and Glaxo Smith Kline, are very successful in the Albanian market.

We do hope that their success will encourage other British investors and companies from all sectors to explore new opportunities offered by the Albanian market as BP recently announced.

I hope too that the Lord Mayor will visit furthering cementing our relations.

Well, I made this short remark tonight, which many of you might think it is a lesson of history, but there are countries and people in the world whose history has overpassed their fame and culture.

This is Albania and these are the Albanians.

I welcome you Master and all members of the Guild to become the future Child Harolds, Lord Byron's character and to discover my country, with its rich culture and unseen beauty, where Hospitality is our value and "Besa –The Oath and Trust" is our philosophy ...

Thank you for the honour you have all given me and my delegation tonight and please allow me to take this opportunity to convey to you all the warmest greetings and wishes for a Happy and Holy Christmas and a prosperous New Year 2015.

It is now my distinct pleasure to invite you all to stand in a toast to The Lord Mayor, the City of London Corporation and the Sheriffs.

The Lord Mayor, the City of London Corporation and the Sheriffs”.