



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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REPISHTI: Thank you, Mr. Zeneli, for this interview. I would like to begin the conversation by talking about the roles that you have played in public sector reform here in Albania. First, would you briefly describe your current position and related posts that you have held in the past several years?

ZENELI: *OK, thank you. Currently, I manage the Brain Gain program, which is an initiative of the Albanian government, supported by UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] in Albania. The purpose of the program is to engage—as effectively as we can—the diaspora, the Albanian diaspora, in the development of the country. The way we have organized the program is in three major clusters. One is capacity development in public administration. The second is capacity development in universities and institutions of higher education. The third is engagement of the diaspora in the private sector or business developments in the country. Interrelated with these three is the process of developing a database of well-known and well-trained Albanians abroad, with the purpose of either inviting them to help in the development of the country or in asking them to come in the country and work for a certain amount of time, as they see fit, with whatever they are doing. Before this, I have been involved in the establishment of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration in Kosovo, and have developed courses related to policy making, comparative politics, government, and international relations in the Albanian language.*

REPISHTI: I would like to continue the interview and discuss a little bit the broader mission and context which this program that you are running is currently in. Can you talk a little bit about the capacity of the public sector and civil service, as you see it here in Albania, or when you began to work on the reform? What was it like then? What is it like now?

ZENELI: *We entered the field of capacity development, and we are not talking anymore in Albania about capacity building, so this is a new phase. I'll say at the late stage, starting as early as 1991, but then following the crisis of 1997, in Albania there have been several steps taken to build capacities in order to make the public administration more effective and more responsive to the people, on one side, but also more responsive and effective to the requirements that European processes—and integration processes, more largely—put upon a country like Albania. There are regular developments, I'd call them, especially supported by the World Bank and institutions that work closely with the Department of Public Administration. What we do is a little bit more different, in the sense that we try to identify areas where expertise is readily available in the Albanian circles. What I mean by Albanian circles, is groups of Albanians that have migrated during the 1980s or earlier, or groups of Albanians that have had the opportunity to study abroad and who are planning a return to the country. In January of this year, we completed a very detailed study on capacity gaps in the public administration. By the way, I can share it with you; I can send you a copy of it. And we identified 32 different types of positions that in the conversations, and in the meetings, and in the questionnaires that we ran, we found out that these were the needs that each ministry and each sector of public administration had—but also, that these needs could be easily filled with this group of people that we are trying to bring in. So in other words, our analysis tried to match the goal of the program—engaging the diaspora—with the needs. The second reason why we did this was that we were looking for specific skills that are not in the country, the idea being that we wanted to be very careful with the process of raising jealousies or other dissatisfactions. Especially when you deal with groups of people that are qualified abroad, they—by nature, I'd say—bring some sort of competition or insecurity to the people that are in the country. The reason why we were looking for specific skills that are not readily available was in order to have a result that—*

but also, a well justified policy saying that, "Look, we have found out these positions, opportunities for these—I mean in Albania, there will be no possibility to create these kind of positions; let's bring them from abroad, but let them be Albanians." So this is what we have done more specifically in terms of the reform. Currently, the government of Albania just approved our mid-term action plan, in which 20 positions have been granted in the Public Administration. So, out of 32 types of positions, 20 are already available. We are hoping this number will increase. The way we are doing this is in two forms. We are asking each ministry to give us whatever positions they have available so that we can consult our database, distribute the news and have people that have graduated abroad, or are interested in returning, apply for those positions. The second thing that we are doing, is that in case that there is no position available—the ministry might have no vacancies, nobody retiring, etc., etc.—we create the position that we have considered a coordinating position. Now, some of these positions are for very specific duties. Let us say, in the Ministry of Economy, for example, they might need someone that has expertise in—I'm just saying—debt management for a certain industry sector in Albania. We try to bring this person in for up to a year. If the need is longer than a year, then we cooperate with the ministry to return this temporary position into a regular position, or a position that fits with the organization of a particular ministry, and becomes part of the civil status within the public administration. So this is how we are doing the public administration part of the job, and so far they have been very supportive. By they, I mean the government in general. We'll see now with the competitions how the process will go and who will be selected.

REPISHTI: Can I ask you a bit now about how you select these individuals? How you attract these individuals?

ZENELI: *We, as a Brain Gain program, we do not select them. What we do is we advertise on our web page and in other pages or electronic formats that have high traffic among Albanians. We advertise; people apply. We come in with our incentive packages, with our support schemes, once the person has been selected. I have to add something: if a person comes from abroad, he or she automatically gets 20 points extra if they have a master's degree, or 30 points extra if they have a PhD degree. In other words, they enter the competition with an added advantage. That's the first. The second: they, because of this particular preference, and because the positions that we have required are looking for very specific skills, have a much easier time to be accepted in the public administration than there will be for normal positions, etc., etc. But the key for us is not to disturb, in any way, form, or shape, the process of hiring. The reason being, as I said before, no jealousies, and we want to be as transparent as we can.*

REPISHTI: Was this reform and this program a response to donor conditions, or was it led—. What was the role of the government in it all?

ZENELI: *Very important. It was, I mean, you might also remember that this had started since 1997 or 1998, with a fellowship program of the Soros Foundation. So, when Albania had that particular meltdown in the public administration, George Soros gave a million dollars in what they considered at the time a fellowship program, and they developed this concept of "topping up" salaries. After that, there was another effort and governmental decision made to give specific bonuses to people with degrees from abroad, but it never actualized. Then in 2006, the government of Albania asked UNDP to help in the process of developing the current program that we are running. As I said before, and I would like to stress, even in the nature of the program, we are what is considered an*

NEX, a nationally executed project, which means that the government has the main role. UNDP facilitates the process, in terms of the expertise needed, in terms of skills required to develop these policies. The example that I'll give you is that since we have started this project, we have changed up to eight laws and regulations that make up the process of entering the public administration, if you are coming from abroad, with the qualifications that I mentioned before, much easier. The most important thing, from a governmental perspective, is the fact that if you enter the public administration with a Brain Gain status, you qualify for what the government considers soft loans for housing. This is one of—it's government decision 600 of last year, and we had direct impact on that, and changing that, in order to facilitate the process. In other words, we try to influence policies that create an enabling environment for the people that return, on one side, and we try to make the process of reintegration as easy as we can, through these installation grants or other monies that we make available to the people that are returning. That's why it's programmatic.

REPISHTI: I'm really interested in this basket of laws, or these laws that have been made. Could you talk a little bit more in detail about other things that you are doing to facilitate reintegration?

ZENELI: *The first one, as I said, starts with the process of applying for a position. So if you have a master's or PhD degree, you automatically get 20 to 30 points extra. So you might not need to go through an interview, in other words. Or they might reduce some of the questions that they ask in the written exam. The second law that has been changed has been the one that makes equal positions in the public administration with the positions in the university. Which means if you have a PhD title, you'll get the same benefits even if you are working in the public administration. The benefits would be the same: salaries, hours, etc., etc. The other one that we worked on, as I mentioned, is this one on housing. Then there is another one on salaries, which grants people who come with degrees a bonus that varies from \$150—from 1,500 Lek to \$200, depending on the degree that they have. The other one is the one that has articulated skills in shortage in Albania. For example, if you come with a degree in IT, information technology, you automatically get another bonus, because this is an area that Albania has a lot of needs, but the skill is not readily available. So in order to get these people in the public administration or public sector, we give them this added bonus just to be there. And then, the biggest of all is the changes we have made in the higher education law. We have now lowered the levels of degrees that you need to qualify for leadership positions in the universities. For example, now you can become a rector of a university or a president of a university in Albania if you have a PhD earned abroad. Before, this was not available. On the other hand, we have also applied—I mean, this is also in the law—we have made the position of visiting professor as a permanent position. Which means, if I have people that are abroad that are, you know, well set in the universities, they can come here during summer or some other time, but also enjoy the benefits and the perks of a local position.*

The other law that we worked on, that we tried to modify in order to increase the interest from the diaspora, was that of academic titles. Let us say, if you are an associate professor somewhere in the United States or somewhere in Europe, you can apply and get the same title in Albania. And the procedures have become much more relaxed than they used to be in the past.

REPISHTI: Yes. Now I'd like to discuss a little bit the Soros Program that you mentioned before. Can you tell me a little bit more about it, as well as what is its perceived impact or accomplishments or critiques?

ZENELI: *I can—remind me to also send you the study on this. But the benefit from it, I'll say—and this is in discussions that I've had and meetings I've had with Soros—is that it created an environment in the Albanian public administration that was more open to people coming from abroad. The second benefit was that it created pressure for the Albanian government to increase salaries and go through regular salary reforms in the public administration. The third important process was that it was closely connected to something that I worked more closely with, the internship opportunities—that now, you know, have become a norm, but in 2001, when I started this project, nobody ever thought about the idea of having students, either Albanians or students that are studying abroad, be part of the processes that public administration was going through.*

In terms of negative things, and this is what we are trying to better, it has created this concept of salary “top-ups” and some major feeling of discontent. You had two people doing the same job in the same office, one getting three or four salaries extra simply because they had studied abroad. No, I mean, added value or added requirements.

I would say, overall, it was very positive. It has had a tremendous impact, especially in the work of the Mayor's Office in Tirana. I think the time has come to have a more programmatic approach. That's why Brain Gain is there. I think it was just natural—I mean, Soros started it with the hope that the government would pick it up, and so it did.

REPISHTI: Can you discuss a little bit more the specific role of the government in this reform, and what new initiatives it has considered?

ZENELI: *For this particular government, the role has been not only that of a leader but also more closely related to their electoral program. When this government came to power, they had promised that they were going to respond more effectively to issues related to “brain drain,” this massive migration of expertise outside the country. Initially, before the program started, the prime minister invited a lot of people that had degrees from abroad. Most of his close staff, I'd say at least 70% of his advisory group, were people that had studied abroad, had job experiences abroad, and brought a new air. I think the other thing that prompted this was this group—for some reason the name in English is not coming to me now—and then after this, the idea came that it should be something more programmatic. They got together with UNDP; they developed the current program. I was asked to come from abroad. I competed for the position, and it was open for people who were abroad, not for people in Albania.*

REPISHTI: Can you describe a little bit whether there were different models from different countries that were considered when you were starting?

ZENELI: *In terms of a Brain Gain?*

REPISHTI: Yes.

ZENELI: *Yes. Our model is between an Asian model, that is sort of a full package, and more of a needs-based/expertise model that you find in Southeast Asia or some of the African countries, and Europe as well. What you see in these countries are—you see packages that are developed in order to attract back into the country a certain skill or a certain expertise. In Europe, for example, they are trying to—they go after the very big names or very highly qualified experts, and they build up laboratories, etc., etc. when they want to invite big names back to*

their own countries. We are not at that level yet. In a country like Korea, they have the housing deal and other things as part of the package. What we have made differently from these models is that our model is not individual-based. It's more institution-based. As I told you at the beginning, we are trying to strengthen and develop capacities, but at an institutional level. If the institution does not recognize the need for these people, then we do not interfere. But if they do, then we say, "Good for you, we are glad we got these people, here are these extra monies so that you can keep these people, retain them, keep them happy, but also develop your institution." This is the new thing that has happened in Albania; it does not happen in other countries. We offer our grants to the institutions, not to the individuals. Of course they go to the individuals, but it is the institution that distributes the grants, not us as a program.

REPISHTI: Could you describe a bit more how these financial incentives work, and who finances them?

ZENELI: *Currently, we have three major donors. One is UNDP core funds; another one is—you might already know that Albania is part of the U.N.—U.N. initiatives or pilots, so some of the funding comes from this packet; and the Albanian government. Currently, €800,000 of the program, mainly covering 100 positions that are going to be open in the universities, go into the—I mean, the money for that comes from the government.*

REPISHTI: Could you describe now—I'm going to get more into the specifics of the program—could you describe the steps that were taken initially, and how the whole program was started? What were some of the initial difficulties? And for you as a program leader that was helping start this initiative?

ZENELI: *I think Brain Gain program provides a very specific case, in the sense that it came at a very opportune time. What I mean by that is that Albania had gone through the fellowship program; there were certain needs and whatever identified, and this government was very interested in this kind of program, and was genuinely interested having people coming back, and genuinely interested in developing a public administration that would be more open to this group of people that were coming from abroad. In another way, I'd say that there was not a lot of opposition to this because in practical terms, people that return from abroad with degrees are sons and daughters of people who have been in very good positions. So even that helped in the process. Furthermore, I would say because I had worked with similar programs in Kosovo, and because I had the record of achievements in this field, many things came more easily than they would have come if the program was to be run by someone who was not familiar with the way the government, or other institutions, work in Albania. I mean, I took the leadership of this program after, I would say, more than 10 years of experience in both teaching and working with governments in the region. So I wouldn't say that I had difficulties in terms of establishing the program. The difficulties that I've noticed have been—one, in that UNDP and the other international organizations were not very familiar with the process, so I had to do a lot of guidance in that. The second difficulty for me was in operating with these two pools, or two groups, of decision-makers: government on one side, UNDP on the other. I mean, finding the common denominator in terms of decisions for both of them proved difficult at times. Because they serve different groups. The government has a political plan that they want to implement, and they want to run again for office, etc., etc. UNDP has a different agenda and works differently. The other thing that I might have mentioned to you, I'm not very sure, is that familiarity with a program was not as such—was not at levels that would make the program accepted easily in the lower levels of the public administration. So, if*

at the level of the prime minister and ministers, the support was very high, the further down you went to the public administration, the more difficult to implement things. Because the climate in a small country like Albania towards people that come back is not as welcoming as it should be. That's why I mentioned to you before that we had to go through all these laws, and all these regulations in the laws, that, would the people currently in the government be as effective or as pleased at the people that would come back.

Another difficulty that I anticipate now is with the universities, and how open they are going to be towards this new blood that would come in. In general, the universities are pockets of a very conservative nature. There we will see how it will go.

REPISHTI: I want to return a little bit to the discussion that you had about government and the U.N. and how they both have different agendas, and this might at times have caused difficulties for the program. Can you describe a little bit more in detail how they actually ended up working together, and what were the steps that were taken towards collaboration? And any details in terms of where the leadership was vested, and how often did they meet, and the kind of dialogue that was created—?

ZENELI: *In the program document, it's clearly stated out that you have a steering committee with members from both the government and UNDP, and that they meet regularly etc., etc. This took place, but then the thing that I felt every now and then was that UNDP looked at this as a government activity or a government initiative: the government should take the lead. So, I'd feel like—sometimes I'm like, OK, so what do I tell the government? But then at other times, the government would be like—why don't you ask UNDP to provide more of expertise in this and that? And we did that. I mean, there were certain—for example, this study that I told you about, the UNDP took over and we hired an international consultant, etc., etc., but, in terms of—I think the problem with this kind of program is that it's very national; UNDP is very international. And they would have—by the nature of the organization, they would have a hard time dealing with this thing that is very national in nature. UNDP looks at things in a more globalized concept. For a government to go to the globalized level, it takes more time, and there I think is the problem. But I would like to stress the fact that it hasn't been counterproductive at any time. When I saw, for example, that there was a problem, I would immediately have a meeting, and things would be clarified.*

REPISHTI: Now you spoke about how civil servants themselves reacted to these programs. Was there a broad base of support for the programs in the community or civil society, or were they controversial with them?

ZENELI: *Civil society—we cooperated with them in producing the initial policy document for the program. There were two civil society organizations, think tank types, that did the study. In the process of reform in the public administration, and in the interviews that we took for our all, we also cooperated with different civil society organizations that are dealing with the reform. We cooperated with Soros again and their network when they were doing a study of the needs and the problems that people that return face in the public administration. So I would say that it wasn't—I didn't find any particular resistance to the program. Again, in very practical terms, people that return are sons and daughters of Albanians who at one point or another have worked in the public administration. So it's sort of a refreshing process of the public administration. I don't see that as a problem. But then there has been some concern voiced with this issue of what we are doing*

for the people that are already in the public administration, how we are retaining the skills that already exist. The government responded very effectively towards that; they created what they considered the Excellency Fund, which is a €1,000,000 fund that gives opportunities to people working in the public administration or to the junior staff of the universities to complete their master's or Ph.D. studies abroad. If they win—I mean, if they are accepted in a very well known program, the likes of the Harvards, etc., etc, they sign a five year contract with the government, and the government pays for their expenses for the time that they are in their studies. So what was done, we are trying to attract people on one side, but we also trying to create opportunities for those that are in the country to get better.

REPISHTI: How big is this program? How many people have benefited from this? Do you have a sense?

ZENELI: *I think there were, you can see the figures on the net, at the page of the Ministry of Education, but so far 20 people have gone. We were not that happy. By "we," I mean the government, not the UNDP at this point. The prime minister criticized openly in a meeting we had with the universities—with the university heads, on the 26th of April, the rectors and the deans—for not making the information public enough to their assistants and to the junior staff that this opportunity exists. So there is a lot of—right now, as we speak, there is a lot of effort being put in publicizing the Excellency Fund.*

REPISHTI: Yes. Now, many countries have found it difficult to implement these sort of programs, scholarship money for service, and how to make this contract binding. You said that it's a five-year contract that these people have to sign with the government. Sometimes they leave after—they don't come back after the service is up. What are the steps that the government has taken?

ZENELI: *Too early to say. It has just started last year. I think they'll run into difficulties. But at this point, I do not know how effective and how binding the contracts would be. Personally, I think five years is too much, and it will make it ineffective.*

REPISHTI: Why?

ZENELI: *Because you can now—I mean, people change. Once they get their degrees, or once they get more qualifications, their horizons enlarge and widen. They look at the world in a more global perspective. I don't think just for the Albanian government, but for any government in the developing world, the challenges that they can put to these people are good enough to make them stay. I mean, it might be very well the case that these people want to come back and work for five years, or even longer. But I have my doubts.*

REPISHTI: Can I ask a little bit more about the current compensation system that you give to the ministries to then distribute to these people that come from the diaspora?

ZENELI: *We have built what they consider Brain Gain incentive packages that look at two components. One is their qualification in terms of education. They must have a master's, and there are very specific qualifications for the master's: at least 90 European credit transfer system credits, above average grade, universities that are recognized and accredited by international agencies. So it's very strict in terms of that. And also PhDs, now we give them—I have to look at the figures—we give to people that have PhDs up to \$12,000 a year. Up to \$10,000 a year to people that have a master's, just for working in the public administration.*

REPISHTI: How many people have benefited from this so far?

ZENELI: *Right now— as I told you, there are two categories: public administration and higher education. We have piloted it in higher education with six people, and in public administration with two. We'll add 18 more to the public administration and 100 more to the higher education.*

REPISHTI: In what timeframe?

ZENELI: *They start their jobs in October; the grants go for a year. If the institution in which they are hired requests a second round, then we'll go on for second round, but up to two years, not more than that. Because the whole concept of this is, as I mentioned, an installation package. These people come back, they need some start-up money for their—whatever activity they are doing. They might need money for a car. They might need money for their housing, apartment, whatever. They might need money for—I don't know, to buy baby clothing or whatever. So this money is there, available, so their transition towards reintegration into Albanian society becomes smoother.*

REPISHTI: Were there other reforms that were put in place at the same time? You mentioned changing legislation. How did these reforms affect the implementation of your program? If you can—

ZENELI: *There has been talk about a civil service reform, and the process of civil service reform goes vis-à-vis the process of European integration, which requires the Albanian public administration to be more adept to the needs of this process, and then to be more effective towards European agendas. When you look at the study that we made for the capacity gaps, we are trying to address skills that are closely related to the European integration process. What we did was look at the reform as a way of enhancing the role that our program plays, but also as a way of phasing us out. This is not a problem that is supposed to go on forever. I mean, hopefully Albania will build such incentives on its own, that people find it interesting to return because of the integration process, because of whatever is going on in the country, not because of the installation package that we offer. So our step is of the start-up, but we want to phase out and then move along in a process or in a path that is already going on, and this is the European agenda that the country had adopted.*

REPISHTI: Looking back at your program, it's still fairly new—what would you say were the major accomplishments and gains? Do you think some of these have been scaled back, or maybe scaled back with changes in government, or—?

ZENELI: *The accomplishments are these—I mean, the creation of this environment that is more welcoming. A big major accomplishment is that we, in Albania, now have—we talk in terms of Brain Gain vocabulary. In 2006, if you mentioned Brain Gain, people would not really understand, but now, it's very common; it has been picked up in media, in studies, in discussions, in policies. The other big thing for me is that UNDP got involved in processes that are, I would say, developing, but also national in nature. So UNDP generally brings in the best of expertise, but they look at whoever is the best. With this program, you not only bring in the best, but also bring in people that have, in one way or another, a connection to this country. So this is, to me, very big. And the biggest of all, only one week or two ago, on the 30th of July, 2008, I had the government commit €800,000, which is the biggest donation a government in this region has ever made to a program that is related to UNDP, one, and that is related to this particular concept of Brain*

Gain. Now other governments will come in; they cannot go back. They will simply have to do better than this.

REPISHTI: Now one last question. If you had advice for someone else in another country, doing a very similar initiative, what would you suggest to them?

ZENELI: *More staff. Most of the problems that a country like Albania, but also countries of the region face, are human resource problems. You cannot—and I'm going beyond the staff just for the program, you need to look at the issue of human resources in a more effective way. I mean, communist systems, I would say, create such a desert when it comes to skills; its uni-track people are the model. In a process like this one, and especially when you talk about integration, you need skill and talent in many areas, but especially in management. So if another country is going to do Brain Gain, I would say Brain Gain in management, that's the key. If you have good managers, they are going to find the good people to work with them, and find them anywhere in the world.*

REPISHTI: OK, Mr. Zeneli, thank you so much for the interview and your thoughts on the subject.

ZENELI: *You're welcome.*