

Albania strides towards EU accession - BBC report

15/12 - Here is part of a recent report by Paul Henley from the BBC.

"Many in Albania - which has Europe's fastest-growing economy and aspirations to join the EU - feel the former dictatorship has come a long way fast.

Lufti Dervishi (a director of Transparency International in Albania) is old enough to compare living in Albania today with how life used to be.

Whenever he thinks the road towards European integration is not a fast enough one, he stops to remind himself how far his country has come since it threw off what was the continent's strictest communist regime only 19 years ago.

"I can remember the terrible things of the past", he says. "There were times when you could end up in prison just for learning English."

He describes how conversation with a foreigner could be harshly punished and how any mention of "sensitive information", like the fact there were no potatoes in a shop, could result in a long jail sentence.

"And there was awful poverty," he says. "I myself - we were four in the family, four children - can remember the time when my parents could only afford one egg between us for breakfast.

"But when I tell this story to my son who is 12 years old, he just laughs, he cannot understand the reality of the past."

"We have a new generation now and it has many aspirations," he says. "They expect Google, iphones, ipods and high-definition TV. And the country should look to this generation, not to mine."

Technically, Albania can currently boast Europe's fastest-growing economy.

According to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), which is the biggest institutional investor in Albania, the national economy grew by 7% in 2008 and 6% in the first quarter of 2009, driven largely by investment in public infrastructure and in the telecommunications industry.

It is not recession-proof, but foreign investment is increasing, as is confidence in the banks. And all predictions are for the country to stay in the black.

Albanians have been used to power cuts for years, but things have improved to such an extent that, in the spring of this year, the state-owned power company started exporting electricity to neighbouring Greece.