

Distinguished members of this panel and guests, I am honored to be here today to share my thoughts and experience with you and would like to thank the organizers for the invitation at this high level event.

When Mr. Esposito called to extend the invitation at first I felt a bit apprehensive, considering that I have not been a public official in the justice system for more than four years.

In my career I have served as a judge and general prosecutor, but I also am the parent of two teenage girls, and alike every other parent in Albania I aspire a bright future for them, in a country where the rule of law reigns supreme.

I am sure that it may not come as news to you if I say that in my country corruption remains widespread, especially in the highest echelons of power, thwarting the EU accession process, but first and foremost the promise of equal opportunities to our citizens.

By all accounts, international and local reports, the perception of corruption among Albanians remains high, not only among the public administration but also in the institutions tasked with fighting it, being those judges or prosecutors, undercutting faith in the system but also in the efforts to reform it.

When I served as general prosecutor, we charged a number of high ranking officials, elected and appointed, with corruption related offenses; however, we lost most of those cases on procedural grounds. Practically the judicial system refused to hear evidence and testimony, corrupting the very nature of the process that defines a court of law.

When I left office and sought to return to my old job as a judge, a right guaranteed by the law "On the organization and functions of the prosecution office," the High Council of Justice said no, citing nothing less than procedural grounds. Even after I took the case to court and won a ruling by the Supreme Court, they still unlawfully refused, though there were no more legal or procedural grounds left.

If this happens to the country's top prosecutor, imagine what lies in store for the average Albanian citizen. If the High Council of Justice, the institution that oversees the integrity of the justice system and should guarantee the rights of the members of the judicial body, refuses to abide by a High Court decision, it would be needless to say that we have a problem that has to be addressed.

In Albania a culture of impunity has been installed, where a corrupt clique of politicians and judicial officials are above the law. The system is fairly simple. The judges and prosecutors who protect corrupt politicians are promoted. Those who fight the corrupt politicians are sidelined or in some cases even pushed out of the system.

That's why, not only as a former judge and prosecutor, but also as an individual who has had to struggle to have her rights guaranteed by law upheld, I applaud the efforts spearhead by the European Union to reform the justice system in Albania. I believe that the recently approved legal framework that minimizes political influence in the judiciary, but particularly the prescribed vetting process of the integrity of judges and prosecutors, remains the best hope to clean up the system of the cancer of corruption.

The judicial reform brings some radical changes to the justice system, there are many people who oppose it and its implementation will be complex and difficult. However, in its core this reform materializes the country's best hopes that all citizens should be treated equally and fairly in a court of law, which I believe is not only a prerequisite in the fight against corruption but also embodies its core principles.

Citing the wise words of Reverend Martin Luther King Junior, someone who knew a thing or two about injustice, I am well aware that like in every other aspect of life progress in the fight against corruption is "neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a superficial look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels inevitability. Every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

In Albania's efforts to build a society that best embodies European values the "time for apathy or complacency" has long past, and now time has come "for vigorous and positive action."

Thank you.