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Jean Monnet Chair: “Albania toward the EU Regional Development / ALEURD (2012 - 2015)

I am proud and honored to be the first professor to hold the title Jean Monnet Chair in Albania and thus promote teaching and research in EU and regional development. This is particularly relevant given the aspiration of Albania to join the European Union and in lieu of the rapid transformations of our contemporary knowledge-driven society which requires the spheres of academia, government and private sector to work towards regional development with the aim of achieving economic and social cohesion, strengthening human development and tackling regional disparities.

The successful application of the European University of Tirana to the European Commission for the Jean Monnet Chair is a meaningful achievement in many dimensions:

First, the award of the Jean Monnet Chair to the European University of Tirana (UET) is a significant moment for the university itself as it will serve to strengthen its EU academic curricula and to increase its appeal to students, academics, civil society and other stakeholders in the EU integration process and regional development.

- UET is a leading private higher education institution in Albania offering quality teaching, excellent student services and innovative research in various social science, law and economics disciplines. UET seeks to link high quality education and innovative research with development in Albanian society, polity and private sector. In this light, UET has established the *Office for Project Development and Research* which is an integral part of the university and engages in various projects drawing from the expertise of the university. In addition, UET works closely with the *UET Centre*, a think tank that engages in policy-oriented research projects, capacity building initiatives in public policy, sustainable development, human rights, social innovation and entrepreneurship with a particular focus on good governance and democracy. These structures have been recently established and they aim to bridge the gap between knowledge-creation, research and policy making process in Albania. In this sense, the submission of the Jean Monnet Chair project was a great challenge for the Office for Project Development and Research and UET Centre, particularly so given the financial constraints, lack of sustainability and when few people trusted their possibilities to succeed.

Second, the award of the Jean Monnet Chair is a salient achievement for me personally in terms of my professional development and ability to contribute to the academic sphere in my country.

- I have a PhD Degree in Human Geography from the University of Tirana and have successfully completed a second PhD Degree in Regional Development and Planning at the University of Potsdam, Germany. In this sense, I aspired to link my research for my doctoral studies with Albanian academic and policy making spheres. This is why when we considered applying for the Jean Monnet Actions, I pushed forward the idea to focus on regional development as the key topic in EU integration and accession processes for Albania. The award of Jean Monnet Chair will give me the opportunity not only to teach to others what I have learned and experienced while conducting my doctoral studies and



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working on regional development, but more importantly will enable me to promote quality teaching and research in this area in collaboration with my key staff in this project.

Third, the award of the Jean Monnet Chair is an achievement for the team working on the project proposal, application and submission.

- It is an award to the hard and smart work of the team I led as the Director of the Office for Project Development and Research and UET Centre, to their commitment, passion and belief that we would succeed. This is also an opportunity for me to thank the Jean Monnet Key staff for their contribution in making the application successful: Prof. Dr. Adrian Civici; Dr. Odeta Barbullushi, Dr. Erjona Canaj, Ketrina Çabiri, MA and Blerjana Bino, PhD Candidate.

Fourth, the establishment of the Jean Monnet Chair at UET with the support of the European Commission is a significant moment for the higher education landscape and the academic community at large in Albania.

- The Jean Monnet Chair will contribute to the development of quality teaching, innovative research and human resources in the field of EU and regional development in the Albanian higher education landscape in cooperation with civic society, government and the private sector. In addition the Jean Monnet Chair will contribute to lifelong learning by establishing a network of young and distinguished scholars working on research related to the European Union integration and accession processes.

Fifth, the award and establishment of the Jean Monnet Chair in UET is an important moment for the development of projects, programmes and initiatives related to the EU, academia and civil society.

- Several projects and programmes have been implemented in Albania during the last 20 years, and almost all of them aimed at awareness rising and spread of information on European Union and Albanian integration. However, isolated programmes have been presented with the aims to develop theoretical and practical knowledge and expertise on EU and regional development. In this vein, the added value of this project is two folded. Firstly, it disseminates advanced knowledge and information about the EU regional development policy in the context of Albanian integration, and secondly it helps to enrich the expertise of envisaged target groups (students, academics, civil society and local government) in order to strengthen their capacities to benefit from EU structural funds in lieu of the EU accession.

Last, the establishment of the Jean Monnet Chair at UET will contribute to the Albanian society, policy and private sector at large.

- Regional policy in Albania in the context of changing and emerging demands of a knowledge-based society is relatively a novel area of policy process and content. Studies demonstrate that there is limited awareness and isolated intervention programmes regarding the importance of regional-level enterprises for social and economic innovation that could help foster regional sustainable development and smart growth. Considering the significant regional disparities in Albania, the lack of a strategic policy framework on



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regional development, weak implementation capacities, there is an increasing need for Albania, in lieu of the EU accession, to work towards regional development with the aim of promoting economic and social cohesion, human development and tackling regional imbalances.

- Drawing from the above dynamics, the Jean Monnet Chair project at the European University of Tirana aims to develop theoretical and practical knowledge and expertise on EU regional development policy among students, academics, civil society and local government in order to enhance the Albanian capacities to benefit from EU structural funds in lieu of the EU accession. In this sense, the JMC project at UET is a learning, research and communication project that intends not only to disseminate advanced knowledge and information about the EU regional development policy in the context of Albanian integration, but also to enrich the expertise of envisaged target groups in this area and to strengthen their professional competencies.

My team and I strongly believe that what made the difference for this application to succeed were the passion and commitment we placed in the idea and project development. We think that the key is to have a clear idea of what you want to achieve and why and personally love and believe in what you are doing.

Our advice is to focus on:

- ✓ clear and well-argued reason for the project;
- ✓ finding the right momentum for the right project idea in line with the local priorities and attempting to match them with the priorities of EU for development, good governance and smart growth;
- ✓ well-developed project proposal: activities, outputs and impact;
- ✓ innovative approach.

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