



ROCHE'S REVELATIONS ON HIS ALBANIAN 'ADVENTURE'

# "Albania, My Intriguing Second Homeland"

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by Genc Mlloja  
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*The story of a young French businessman which started in the communist self-isolated Albania in 1983 climaxing in 2018 when he was granted the Albanian citizenship. His name is Julien Roche who at a moment of his Albanian 'experience' pledged: «I have seen Albanians becoming French, and as I like to do things backwards I thought: "Why not. I must become Albanian, because Albania has become my second homeland!"*

*Mr. Roche, now Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry France - Albania, unveiled to Albanian Daily News the landmarks of his 4-decade work and life and experience in Albania for the first time.*

*"I consider myself an Albanian, I am honored to be Albanian because I think one should be proud to be Albanian, although I am primarily French. I have my best friends who are Albanian. There are things in this country that are more humanly and friendly than elsewhere. It is like in*

*France 30 years ago. We have lost values there and I have a lot of pleasure to find them here," confesses Mr. Roche in the interview which follows:*

**Albanian Daily News: Mr. Roche, it is a great pleasure to have you as our guest in this conversation, and the 'intrigue' is higher as you are one of those who masterminded the creation of Albanian Daily News newspaper in 1995. Can you please reveal the origins of your ties with Albania and Albanians, and which was the promoter of the idea to launch ADN?**

Mr. Julien Roche: First of all, thank you for your visit, and incidentally we have known each other since many years. Yes, I will tell you a story about Albanian Daily News, the only newspaper in English in Albania.

But at the outset I would like to unveil the circumstances which have brought me to Albania. I am a telecommunications engineer by education. After my studies, I found-

ed a company manufacturing radio systems and at the beginning of the 1980s, I wrote to all the French embassies abroad that we were a French company manufacturing very specific equipments for the State asking them for the possibility of recommending us to State authorities in the country they were accredited if there was any interest in our equipments.

Incidentally, it happened that I got an answer from the French Embassy in Tirana, which, along with the Italian Embassy, was the only Western diplomatic representation in Albania at that time. When I received that reply, I said to myself: Albania? To be really frank, I decided to come just to tell my French friends that I went to Albania because it was a country intriguing everyone. As a matter of fact, that was the real initial prompt - I had never thought that I would do business with this Balkan country. I arrived in Albania, and I felt very good. Everyone spoke French around and

at that time there was one flight per week, so I stayed two weeks. Afterwards, the relationship became a reality.

I was offered a contract worth over a million dollars, but the situation turned to be funny as I was told: "You know, we have no hard currency, but we can pay you with medicinal plants, concretely sage... If you can sell our products abroad, we will buy your radio equipments."

That was the start followed by the sale of sage to the United States, which enabled me to finance the first purchases of telecommunications equipment that I was able to sell to Albania. So the Albanian adventure began, of course, due to a combination of circumstances, which I do not regret today because I have spent fantastic years making Albania my second homeland.

To come to the second part of the question- the launching of Albanian Daily News. Why did my friend Marsel and I create ADN at that time?



ADN's Genc Mlloja with Mr. Julien Roche. On the left, Oct.5, 2015. France awards Mr.Roche with the title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honor



Just for a very simple reason. During the years 1993-1994, we noted that some embassies had political judgments that were surprising on the situation of those times; we realized that ambassadors' translators put, sometimes, the political touch of their interest instead of informing ambassadors in a neutral way. That is why we decided to create Albanian Daily News, which has been an independent English-language newspaper interpreting the facts objectively as much as possible.

**- Can you describe some of the most important moments of your business "journey"? The companies you have run over the years to come to the Chamber of Commerce that you chair since 2012...**

- It is indeed a rather long story and I can confess that I have a failing memory (laugh). But, anyway, from the beginning of my activity in Albania dating back to 1983, I had the authorization to create with the Albanian state the first "Joint-Venture", which was called ADA in 1989 and the Albanian state was 50% shareholder. Later, I chose my friend Marsel, who became my 50-50% partner. One of the first companies we started was an airline and it was for a very simple reason. During the last years of communism, Air France flew to Tirana. It was Paris-Bari-Tirana flight. Then one day in 1991, Air France decided to cutoff the Bari-Tirana line and therefore it was not very comfortable to come to Albania.

I bought two small 30-seater planes from Air Littoral, a company in France that was in big financial trouble at the time and it was selling its planes. With Marsel we created ADA AIR, which ran

Air France Bari-Tirana for 15 years. It was a very nice adventure.

We could not create an airline company for the sole reason that there was not yet a Directorate General of Civil Aviation. We asked the Veritas office in Paris to come and create the Albanian Directorate General of Civil Aviation, which was done being entirely financed by me. This was the creation of the first significant company, and then I participated in the creation of about thirty companies in wide range fields, one of which is Albanian Daily News being in the media market since 25 years.

In the meantime "The Chamber of Commerce" is a joint idea which I had with Hubert de Saint Jean, who was the CEO of Société Générale Bank at the time. At the beginning, we had the status of the "Club d'affaires" for one year bringing together French and Albanian companies. In 2013, we were recognized as a Chamber of Commerce by Paris. We are very proud of the success of the Chamber under the leadership of Ms. Blerina Kazhani, who has worked with us since the first day of the creation in 2012.

**- Besides the business aspect, what do you find interesting in the Albanian society, and how can you describe the relationship that your family and you have established with it?**

- To answer this question, on top of all, I should tell you what has led me to become an Albanian citizen. Firstly, because I have great respect and deep friendship for Albania. I have seen Albanians becoming French, and as I like to do things backwards I thought: "Why not. I must become Albanian, because Albania has become my sec-

ond homeland."

Speaking of my entire family, yes, they have come to Albania several times every year. The French find this country superb. Unfortunately in France the image of this country is not very good, but each visitor becomes a new "ambassador" when they get back to France after visiting it.

**- Based on an award granted to you by Prince Leka at the beginning of this year, I wonder what is the "key" that monarchists, left-wingers, right-wingers, various intellectuals, Francophones, representatives of religious beliefs etc., find in you a friend and collaborator?**

- There is a simple reason - I am not interested at all in politics, internal conflicts, a rather Balkan style, which make admirable people hate each other. I have always thought that a lot of Albanians are very talented in art, culture, business, in a nutshell in every field, and by the way, very often, the French was as their common language. So I realized that these different people, who did not speak to each other due to political or ideological reasons, could be

brought together by speaking in French. And my experience shows that I have met people, who wouldn't even greet each other in streets but finally liked each other. I have found this experience very positive and in the meantime, I regret very much that people in Albania are very antagonist: either friends or enemies, but sometimes it changes, and the friend becomes the enemy and the latter a friend. Then it changes again in three-month time. I think it's stupid; it's a waste of time and energy. Albanians must agree among themselves in the interests of the country to ensure that they join the European Union as soon as possible.

**- What do you find as "special" but also "in common" in this Albanian 'mosaic' making your social, economic, political, intellectual and cultural circle?**

- I think all Albanians love Albania. It is often said that the first religion of Albanians is Albania and that is very true. Albanians love their country - it is a wonderful thing and I really appreciate it. Albanians are very brave people and what Albanians

have done for 27 years is phenomenal given the past which I knew as many foreigners do. I know no country having changed as fast as Albania.

**- We talked about Albanians, but you have become a point of reference for the French and other foreigners who come to Albania, especially business people. How do you feel in this position?**

- Obviously, the French, who come to Albania, are initially suspicious and say things that are not true. Many French people have heard of me through various programs that have been broadcast in France or articles carried by media. It is very easy to find me by my email or phone number. Fortunately, there are not thousands of French people who come here, so I can generally manage the number, and I am happy to receive them and talk about the country in all areas - commercial, economic, cultural and other aspects. I am glad to be able to help Albania in this respect because it deserves that.

**- How does your country evaluate your "stoicism" of**



**being a staunch promoter of Franco-Albanian ties in an irreversible way? Has the French Embassy in Tirana helped you in this effort?**

- I have always had excellent relations with the French Embassy in Tirana. I am now on my 12th French Ambassador. All the ambassadors were very positive on Albania, very often with an 'a priori' view, when they arrived. But all of them have left enchanted and full of regrets. I do not know any French ambassador, who has left Albania with a bad image of it. By loyalty, I must maintain the best relations in the world with the ambassadors and I must say that I have never made an excessive effort, rather the relationship has always followed the best course. All of them have remained my friends and I continue to be in touch with them. Our relationship has always been excellent and since I have been Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce we have been working together to enhance the relations between France and Albania, which, as a matter of fact, must be even better. We are working to improve the economic relations between the two countries day after day.

**- Have you ever had moments when you said 'Enough with Albania' and thought about leaving to start another chapter? In this context, can you share with ADN's readers any difficult moments that may have really upset you?**

- Ju kuptova drejt! (I understood you correctly). Enough with Albania? Some 300 times a day!! No, I'm just kidding (laughs). Objectively, no; I had some concerns in 1997, but things went in the right direction thanks to the European Union. But when some French were evacuated from my house at the beach in Durres, I didn't even think of leaving the country. As a matter of fact, I said to myself I have two Labrador dogs that we could not get into the evacuation helicopters. But, no, really no, I did not think of leaving!

When there are difficult situations, we must not run away from them, but try to find solutions; anyway it is true that the situation was very dangerous. Frankly speaking, I've had annoyances like everyone else with regard to the administration, professional



Mr. Roche with the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama

difficulties, etc. but you have to look at things with serenity. I have never thought of leaving. I have no reason to leave Albania, rather I live on a daily basis. Every time I am in Paris, I return to Tirana with great pleasure.

**- Mr Roche, taking also into account your position as Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry France-Albania (CCI France-Albania) could you give some thoughts on the business climate in Albania? How attractive is this country for foreign investment? How do you view some recent government measures towards companies that have provoked reactions in domestic and foreign business circles?**

- Yes, Albania is obviously a country that should be of interest to foreign investors in many areas. I am not convinced that for 27 years the Albanian authorities have managed this in a sufficiently intelligent and very objective way. I think that the past governors and the current government should intensify their relations with investors. I am talking about serious investors, and make more attractive offers. It is always necessary to make comparisons with countries of the region like Montenegro, Macedonia,

Serbia, etc. They are more attractive countries for fiscal, social policies and other aspects. It is a pity because the potential exists in Albania. Above all, my criticism towards various Albanian governments is that they want to bring in the country very large groups. But Albania, which is a rather small market, should open up to small and medium-sized companies, especially SMEs in agriculture, tourism, etc. like French, Italians, Belgians, etc. Everyone could be interested in investing here. A more "business friendly" environment should be created and investors can be encouraged. I have also noticed that when an investor arrives he is very well received and welcomed and treated. But, in my opinion, once he makes his investment, it is considered that the job is done and there is not enough stimulation. Often, investors feel abandoned, something that might create a very bad image. A very great effort must be done by the authorities in the interest of the country in this direction.

**- Mr Roche, as Franco-Albanian, how do you see the future of Franco-Albanian relations, Albania's progress towards membership to the European Union, in order to have a stronger relationship**

**between our people so that Albanians will no longer be considered as "asylum seekers" but as "Europeans", especially at this moment?**

- I hope that all EU governments, because unanimity is needed, will agree in next June that Albania can start the accession negotiations. It is a strong signal. Otherwise, it would be a very big disappointment. It is true that to join the European Union you need strict criteria. I would say that Albania is suffering today because countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, even Greece, and a little Poland, have been admitted too quickly. Everyone knows that a major American cabinet falsified economic data so that Greece could enter the Euro Zone. Had these countries entered more naturally a few years later, we would not have had to deal with Greece's economic problems, for example. Anyway that's an opinion.

But today, who pays the price for these old mistakes? The new aspirants, including Albania, which have no responsibility for the mistakes made by the EU in bringing in these countries too quickly. So the EU does not want to make these mistakes again. If the negotiations do not succeed, it is not very serious, because, despite everything, the European Union will con-

tinue to finance projects and help the country towards integration. Just a matter of time and merit.

You talk about people leaving. It is a tragedy, especially since they have little chance of staying abroad. Everything is linked with the economic situation. If I were 20 years old with the experience I have today, the last thing I would think is leaving. I would stay in Albania because this country has a great future. It is true that it is not very visible, but I am sure that a young person, who is a little bit patient should stay here. Given the possibilities of the development of tourism and other sectors, he will have a lot of work. I'm not worried at all. The future of young Albanians is in Albania.

**- Julien Roche as an Albanian citizen... ?**

- I consider myself an Albanian, I am honored to be Albanian because I think one should be proud to be Albanian, although I am primarily French. I have my best friends who are Albanian. There are things in this country that are more humanly and friendly than elsewhere. It is like in France 30 years ago. We have lost values there and I have a lot of pleasure to find them here.

**-Thank you!**