

Albania: No closer to joining the EU

Albania joined NATO in April 2009 and has been an EU candidate country since June 2014. After having made some progress in meeting the political criteria and the objectives related to the five key priorities for opening its EU accession negotiations on 26 March 2020, Albania has been advancing towards EU membership at a very slow pace. The main remaining obstacles include flaws in the functioning of its judiciary, in the fight against corruption and in the safeguarding of media freedoms and minority rights.

Background

Albania, a country with a population of 2.8 million, has suffered from the consequences of the 1990s Yugoslav War, but also from a lack of transparency and internal political dialogue. According to the [Anti-Money-Laundering](#) (AML) index published by the Basel Institute of Governance in July 2020, it is the highest-risk European country as regards money laundering. According to Eurostat, Albania has been among the top 10 European countries in terms of the number of [human trafficking](#) victims for several years in a row. The likely scale of [drug trafficking](#) is so big that marijuana traffic alone, worth an estimated US\$4 billion a year, equals about 26 % of Albania's GDP, US\$15.3 billion ([World Bank](#), 2019). In 2019-2020, Albania suffered another [downturn in growth](#) due to falling electricity exports, an earthquake in November 2019 that left 17 000 homeless, and the coronavirus pandemic. According to the World Bank, the Albanian economy [contracted](#) by 6.7 % in 2020, but will rebound by 5.1 % in 2021. Unemployment [remains](#) at 13 %. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has ranked Albania among the top 20 countries of [emigration](#) globally in proportion to their population and second in Europe, after Bosnia and Herzegovina.

EU accession perspective

Albania was identified as a potential [candidate](#) for EU membership as early as the EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki in June 2003. A recent [poll](#) found that as many as 97 % of Albanians were in favour of EU accession. According to the European Commission's 2020 Albania [report](#), the country has made some progress and is moderately prepared for developing a functioning market economy. On 25 March 2020, the EU [opened](#) accession talks with Albania and the country took part in the EU-Western Balkans summit of 6 May 2020. However, [democratic backsliding](#) has been evident: the elections held in 2017 were marked by allegations of vote-buying and led to bursts of anti-government protests throughout 2018 and 2019. EU accession was at the forefront of the electoral debate prior to the 25 April 2021 elections; the ruling Socialist Party, led by the Prime Minister, Edi Rama, [won](#) a tight victory. The EU is the largest provider of [financial assistance](#) to the country. Following the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, the Commission [announced](#) that it would provide over €3.3 billion worth of EU financial support ([mobilised](#) jointly with the European Investment Bank) to the Western Balkans, including Albania. On 6 October 2020, the Commission approved a comprehensive [Economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans](#) with a budget of €9 billion.

European Parliament position

In its [resolution](#) of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Albania, the Parliament welcomed the opening of EU accession negotiations with the country and clear support for EU integration was voiced by all political parties. The Parliament also urged the Albanian authorities to intensify their efforts to strengthen the political dialogue and the functioning of the country's democratic institutions, while tackling corruption and improving the climate for media pluralism and civil society. The Parliament also welcomed the [nomination](#) of Albania's observer to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and encouraged the authorities to take full advantage of FRA's expertise in order to bring the country's legislation and practices in line with the EU *acquis* and standards.

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