



Albania: ready for candidate status?

The Commission's [2012 progress report](#) on Albania recommends an upgrade from potential candidate status to candidate status, provided the country completes its reforms of the judiciary and public administration and its review of Parliamentary rules of procedure.

Albania's path towards accession

Albania emerged as a [potential candidate for EU membership](#) at the 2003 Thessaloniki European Council. In 2006, it signed a [Stabilisation and Association Agreement \(SAA\)](#) with the EU and since 2007 has received financial assistance under the [Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance \(IPA\)](#), to support the reform process on its path to European integration. Following Albania's application for EU membership in 2009, the Commission in its 2010 [Opinion on Albania's application](#) for EU membership set out 12 key priorities to be fulfilled before accession negotiations could be opened. According to the [Commission's 2011 progress report](#), Albania had not met most of them in 2011 and was therefore again not ready for candidate status. In its [2012 progress report](#), in contrast, the Commission notes "substantial" progress, mainly resulting from the achievement of *four* out of *twelve* key priorities, e.g. the [appointment of an Ombudsman and the adoption of the electoral reform](#). Nonetheless, the Commission lists a large number of serious shortcomings, e.g. in the fight against rampant corruption and organised crime, and state interference in the judiciary. The Sofia-based Centre for Liberal Strategies has claimed that the Commission is looking for a vague "[critical mass](#)" of progress rather than the fulfilment of all key priorities, which this report may be seen to confirm.

Overcome trench warfare in Albania

In the past few years, progress on Albania's reform agenda has been seriously hampered by a [highly polarised political landscape](#). The persistent power struggle between the ruling Democratic Party and the opposition Socialist Party is its prominent feature. The opposition boycotted parliamentary activities in protest at

[irregularities](#) in the conduct of the 2009 parliamentary elections and the 2011 local elections. This has led to a huge backlog of those legislative proposals requiring a three-fifths majority. The long-standing political stalemate came to an end only when the two parties reached [political agreement](#) to engage in cross-party cooperation on accession-related reforms in November 2011. However, this agreement has proved to be [extremely fragile](#) more than once. A case in point is the Democratic Party's attempt to [pass](#) the three legislative acts requested by the EU. This failed on 20 November 2012, as they did not obtain the required qualified majority due to a power struggle over the [Fieri Region](#).

Reactions to the 2012 progress report

[Albania's political leadership](#) welcomed the Commission's decision and acknowledged that free and fair parliamentary elections in 2013 would be the litmus test for Albania. The think-tank [European Movement in Albania](#), based in Tirana, endorsed the Commission's conditional recommendation as a driving force for continued reforms in Albania. But the [German Council on Foreign Relations](#) concluded that granting Albania candidate status in light of the poor results achieved would be a politically motivated decision not justified by objective criteria. [The Netherlands](#) argues that, judged upon the [Copenhagen criteria](#), Albania is not ready for candidate status, as it falls short of a convincing track record in key reform areas. The majority of Member States, which seem "[very sceptical](#)" about granting Albania candidate status, have remained silent.

EP position

In its [motion for a resolution](#) on the 2012 progress report on Albania, the AFET committee stresses that Albania must deliver "the critical mass of concrete results" in the pending key reform areas before it can advance to the next stage of its accession process. It calls on the Council to grant Albania EU candidate status without further delay, subject to completion of these reforms.