

Albania: 2016 developments on the EU path

In 2016, Albania came a step closer to EU accession. Despite political struggles, the country set the stage for deep judicial reform and made progress on its five key priorities. Acknowledging this, the European Commission recommended starting accession talks as soon as Albania has shown tangible progress in reforming its judiciary, fighting corruption and holding free and democratic elections.

The European Commission's 2016 report

In 2010, in its [opinion](#) on Albania's EU membership application, the Commission assigned the country [12 key priorities](#), which the 2013 report reduced to five: reforming the judiciary and the public administration, fighting corruption and organised crime, and protecting human rights. They are almost identical to the 'fundamentals first' priorities set for all aspirant countries (See box). The [2016 report](#) acknowledged steady progress towards fulfilling all five of them.

'Fundamentals' – state of play

	Progress	Level of preparation
Judiciary	good	some
Corruption	some	some
Organised crime	some	some
Freedom of expression	none	some/moderate
PAR	some	moderate
Economic criteria	some	moderate

Derived from [European Commission](#), 2016.

Judicial reform, first among equals in terms of priorities, was the highlight of the 2016 report, which assessed, for the first time, progress as 'good'. Despite a sharply polarised political scene, Albania's parliament unanimously adopted some [pivotal constitutional amendments](#), passed a set of laws reorganising the justice system and adopted a 'vetting law' aimed at banning criminal offenders from public office. The Venice Commission issued an [opinion](#) on the drafting of the judicial reform and an [amicus curiae brief](#) in December, confirming the compliance of the vetting law with

international conventions (the opposition had questioned its constitutionality before the [Constitutional Court](#)). All these steps laid the basis for a comprehensive judicial reform. However, there is more work to be done for the adoption of 40 related legislative acts and to overcome shortcomings in the judiciary, such as politicisation, corruption, limited accountability and ineffective oversight mechanisms.

Albania pressed on with its **public administration reform** (PAR) and introduced more transparent recruitment procedures for civil servants; both moves were assessed positively. Still, to attain greater efficiency and professionalism, the public administration has to become politically neutral and make consistent use of a merit-based system for recruiting civil servants. **Corruption** and **organised crime** remain important obstacles to EU accession. Despite positive steps, such as the newly adopted law on whistleblower protection and the destruction of cannabis plantations, the number of final convictions remains low. In November 2016, an EU [anti-corruption project](#), 'the biggest of its kind' for the region, was launched to assist the government. As for **human rights protection**, a revamped legal framework is in place, yet it is not sufficiently well implemented. Although the overall environment is assessed as 'conducive' to the freedom of expression', political influence in the media and substantial self-censorship among journalists, among others, remain sore issues.

European Parliament position

In its motion for a resolution on the 2016 report, the Foreign Affairs Committee welcomes Albania's continued progress on EU-related reforms, in particular of the judiciary. It calls for accession negotiations to open as soon as there is credible progress with its implementation. In view of the general elections due in 2017, the EP urges the country to carry out electoral reform. Special attention is also paid to improving the transparency and inclusivity of parliamentary activities. The text commends Albania on its continued full alignment with EU foreign policy declarations and for its continued commitment to strengthening regional cooperation.

Own-initiative report: [2016/2312\(INI\)](#); Committee responsible: AFET; Rapporteur: Knut Fleckenstein (S&D, Germany).

