

**EUROPEAN UNION-ALBANIA STABILISATION AND ASSOCIATION
PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE
(SAPC)**

17th Meeting
22 January 2024
Brussels

RECOMMENDATIONS

The European Union-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee (SAPC) held its seventeenth meeting on 22 January 2024, in Brussels, co-chaired by Mr Manolis KEFALOGIANNIS on behalf of the European Parliament Delegation and Mr Toni GOGU on behalf of the Albanian Parliament Delegation.

It exchanged views with:

- **H.E Mr Igli HASANI**, Minister of European and Foreign Affairs, on behalf of the Government of Albania
- **Ms Michèle DENEFFE**, Relex Coordinator and COELA Chair, Belgian Presidency-in-Office of the Council
- **Ms Elsa FENET**, Head of Division, Western Balkans, European External Action Service
- **Mr Alberto CAMMARATA**, Deputy Head of Unit for Albania, North Macedonia, DG NEAR, European Commission

The members of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee addressed the following subjects:

- Rule of law, fight against organized crime and corruption;
- Economic development, tourism and environmental policies;
- Media;
- Civil society and youth;
- Good-neighbourly relations and regional cooperation.

The Stabilisation and Association Parliamentary Committee, in accordance with Rule 3 of its Rules of Procedure and Article 122 of the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Agreement, addresses the following Recommendations to the Stabilisation and Association Council and to the institutions of Albania and of the European Union:

1. Commends Albania's strategic commitment to EU membership, which represents the aspirations of Albanian citizens towards democracy and prosperity, reflects the lasting consensus among political parties and enjoys the overwhelming support among citizens;
2. Reiterates the importance of transparency, accountability and inclusiveness of the accession process, including of its parliamentary dimension; urges decision-makers to collaborate in efforts towards meeting the membership criteria as soon as possible;
3. Emphasizes the importance of Parliament's role in the European Integration process and law enforcement, calling for stronger Parliament involvement to boost Opposition engagement. Urges increased government transparency from negotiation onset. Stresses Parliament's vital check-and-balance function, highlighting the need for inquiry committees; reminds that the new Law on Parliamentary Commissions of Inquiry was approved without consensus; encourages the use of various oversight tools including commissions of inquiry, interpellations, and motions with debate, in accordance with legal provisions, to strengthen democratic accountability and governance in Albania;
4. Welcomes and commends Albania for concluding successfully the screening process by mobilizing significant resources engaged actively in this process by Chief negotiator and the reformed EU negotiation structures, as the first and crucial step ahead of the opening of the accession negotiations; calls for the timely and meaningful implementation of the necessary reforms;
5. Welcomes the EU leaders' Declaration following the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Brussels on 13 December 2023 and in particular its strong commitment to the membership perspective of the Western Balkans, and calls for the acceleration of the accession process, based upon credible reforms, fair conditionality and the principle of own merits;
6. Acknowledges the importance of the EU's continuous technical and financial assistance in supporting the cross-cutting accession-related reforms, notably through the Instrument of the Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) as the main source of a merit-based conditional funding; welcomes the new Growth Plan and its primary goal to support economic growth and significantly accelerate socio-economic convergence and integration in the EU single market before membership, upon meeting the necessary reforms; looks forward to the comprehensive implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan and the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, as important tools in tackling socio-economic disparities, improving infrastructure and regional connectivity, and helping the country improve the green and digital transition;

7. Commends Albania's full alignment with EU's foreign and security policy, and the country's clear-cut response to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, including by imposing sanctions on the Russian Federation and Belarus; reiterates its concern that not all candidate countries in the Western Balkans have aligned with the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy; underlines the importance of jointly tackling the circumvention of sanctions and closing loopholes in their implementation; praises Albania for hosting Ukrainian citizens fleeing the war;

8. Praises Albania's continued efforts in promoting and defending the rules-based international order, notably during its mandate in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), through its efforts on areas such as the peace and security agenda, on accountability and justice for human-rights abuses across the world, and on combatting sexual violence in conflict zones;

9. Welcomes Albania's contribution to cultivating regional cooperation and stability in the Western Balkans, and its active role in inclusive regional initiatives, including the Common Regional Market as a stepping stone towards the integration into the EU's single market; acknowledges and supports, furthermore, Albania's ongoing commitment to the Berlin Process, emphasizing the importance of implementing necessary reforms for the effective absorption of funds, thereby reinforcing its path towards European integration;

10. Regrets the climate of harsh political polarisation that spills over on the entire society; deplores that despite the establishment of the ad hoc committee on electoral reform in February 2022, no progress has been made neither on the adoption of any text nor in addressing the outstanding recommendations of the OSCE/ODIHR and the Venice Commission; emphasizes the paramount importance of including all voices from the opposition in the electoral reform process to ensure a truly representative and all-inclusive approach; calls for a constructive and inclusive political dialogue from all sides in fully addressing this issue ahead of the next general election, to strengthen Albania's democratic parliamentary culture and enable smooth electoral process;

11. Reiterates its calls for additional efforts in defending fundamental rights, promoting gender equality and the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and notably those of ethnic minorities; recalls the constitutional principles of the separation of powers, and checks and balances that are of crucial importance for the rule of law; expresses concern over the abuse of the measure of detention before the start of criminal proceedings, as referred to in relevant European Parliament's documents, while underlining the importance of the presumption of innocence and expressing concern over the prohibition of elected officials to take office; urges the Albanian Parliament and the relevant public authorities to take immediate legislative measures to limit the abuse of the indiscriminate use of personal security measures in the criminal process, while respecting the principle of proportionality; calls, further, for the adoption of the remaining implementing legislation that has not advanced in recent years, including that on minority property rights;

12. Underscores the need for sustained efforts in the fight against corruption and organised crime, including the production and trafficking of drugs, in line with EU standards and requirements; underlines the need to tackle the culture of impunity and welcomes, in this respect, the results delivered by the strengthened Specialised Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), while calling for progress on the ongoing cases, notably those at a high level; expresses concern that corruption is prevalent in many areas of public and business life, and that preventive measures continue to have a limited impact, particularly in vulnerable sectors. Increasing the number of final convictions at a high-level remains an important priority to further tackle the culture of impunity; urges Albanian institutions to intensify efforts to combat corruption, emphasizing the need for effective, ongoing actions, particularly in high-risk sectors;

13. Welcomes the good progress Albania has made in the continued implementation and the results achieved of the justice reform; reiterates that the reform, including the re-evaluation (vetting) process of judges and prosecutors, contributes to the necessary strengthening of the independence, transparency, efficiency, accountability of and public trust in the judiciary, and to ensuring universal access to justice; encourages Albania to maintain efforts to mitigate the side effects of the vetting process by filling in vacancies, reducing the backlog of court cases and improving the efficiency of its courts; calls for the avoidance of political interference in the justice system, particularly in the appointment and promotion processes; underlines that it is crucial to eliminate corporatism and ensure that judicial procedures and decisions are held to consistent standards, free from any double standards; emphasizes the need to promptly approve the necessary changes in the judicial reform laws; stresses that these reforms are essential for an independent judiciary that adheres to the best international practices, guaranteeing justice, impartiality, and efficiency; points out that the time for action is now, to uphold the integrity of our judicial system;

14. Welcomes the suspension of the initiatives related to the establishment of the investors' citizenship scheme ("golden passports") which would have posed risks as regards security, money laundering, tax evasion, terrorist financing, corruption and infiltration by organized crime, and would have been incompatible with the EU acquis;

15. Commends Albania's significant efforts in enhancing its anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing measures, which resulted in the country's delisting from FATF "Grey list", and clearly reflect Albania's commitment to international standards in financial regulation and combating the financial crimes;

16. Strongly condemns malign foreign interference and hybrid attacks, including through disinformation, espionage, incitement to all forms of radicalisation and cyberattacks against Albanian citizens and critical infrastructure; calls on Albania to put in place strong legal and institutional safeguards to prevent further breaches of personal data and calls on the EU and the Member States to strengthen relevant support; underlines the importance of alignment with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR);

17. Welcomes the 2023 statistical plan adopted by Parliament, and the start of the population and housing census, which is ongoing; stresses that it should be carried out in a manner that ensures that all national minorities are counted without fear of intimidation; welcomes the further strengthened role of the Institute of Statistics;

18. Welcomes the changes of the specific law on the Role of the Parliament on the European integration process, extending the role of the European Affairs Committee in giving its recommendation in the negotiation positions that the Government will submit to EU, and offering the possibilities to the opposition to be fully involved in the European integration process;

19. Commends the efforts Albania made to strengthen women's rights; underlines the need for continued efforts to achieve comprehensive equality at all levels and to eradicate domestic violence against women;

20. Expresses concern over the situation of media freedoms and freedom of expression, including market and audience concentration and lack of transparency of media funding; calls for the improvement of media transparency, noting with concern that digital media in particular continue to be strongly influenced by political actors, businesses and third parties in terms of funding and content; stresses that any revision of media laws should be in line with the Venice Commission recommendations and should take place in a transparent and inclusive manner, in consultation with media organisations, with the aim of improving media freedom and self-regulation; stresses the need to protect journalists from legal and institutional obstacles; highlights the importance of diverse media ownership for a range of voices in public discourse; urges actions to ensure a safe environment for journalists, supporting a free and fair media landscape crucial for strengthening Albania's democracy;

21. Commends Albania's vibrant civil society's contribution to the development of democracy in the country; points out that the structures in place for consulting civil society need to be reinforced and become fully operational; reiterates its calls for empowering the youth and fostering opportunities for the younger generations, namely by tackling youth unemployment and reversing the brain-drain among young people;

22. While welcoming Albania's addition to the map of top European tourist destinations, underlines the importance of sustainable development; calls in that respect for further aligning of policies and legislation with the EU *acquis* in areas such as water management, chemicals, environmental crime and climate policy; urges Albania to prioritize environmental protection, especially regarding changes to the environmental map; calls for review and improve of the quality of environmental and strategic impact assessments of projects, and public consultations ahead of major projects, in full compliance with the national legislation and the environmental and Energy Community *acquis*; highlights the importance of preserving protected regions for environmental health and sustainable tourism, advocating for development that balances economic growth with ecological conservation;

23. Highlights the importance of stepping up efforts to protect Albania's biodiversity; welcomes the establishment of the Vjosa Wild River National Park, the first wild river national park in Europe, which is the habitat of hundreds of birds and other animals;

24. Calls on both the EU and Albania to accelerate investments in environmentally friendly and more economically viable means of transportation such as railways;

25. Warmly welcomes the establishment of the College of Europe campus in Tirana, and the launch of the application process for the first academic year 2024-2025 as well as the launch of the postgraduate programme "Master of Arts in European Transformation and Integration – The EU and Southeastern Europe"; underlines that the College of Europe presence in Tirana is not only a significant development for higher education opportunities in the country and the Western Balkans, but also a crucial recognition of Albania's EU aspirations.