



TEXTS ADOPTED

P9_TA(2021)0112

2019-2020 Reports on Albania

European Parliament resolution of 25 March 2021 on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Albania (2019/2170(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part¹,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 28 June 2018, the Council conclusions of 18 June 2019 and the European Council conclusions of 17-18 October 2019, which postponed the decisions on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia,
- having regard to the joint statement of the members of the European Council of 26 March 2020 on opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which endorsed the Council conclusions of 25 March 2020 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled ‘Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0057),
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 19-20 June 2003 and the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 29 May 2019 entitled ‘2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2019)0260), accompanied by the Commission Staff Working Document entitled ‘Albania 2019 Report’ (SWD(2019)0215),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘2020 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2020)0660), accompanied by the Commission Staff Working Document entitled ‘Albania 2020 Report’ (SWD(2020)0354),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 July 2020 entitled ‘2020-2025

¹ OJ L 107, 28.4.2009, p. 166.

EU action plan on firearms trafficking’ (COM(2020)0608),

- having regard to the Commission communication of 29 April 2020 entitled ‘Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery’ (COM(2020)0315),
- having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summit of 10 November 2020, which was held in Sofia in the framework of the Berlin Process,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 26-27 June 2014, which included a decision to grant the status of candidate country for EU membership to Albania,
- having regard to its resolution of 25 November 2020 entitled ‘strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms’¹,
- having regard to its resolution of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania²,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled ‘An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’ (COM(2020)0641),
- having regard to the Sofia declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17 May 2018 and the Sofia priority agenda, annexed thereto,
- having regard to the Zagreb Declaration agreed during the EU-Western Balkans summit that took place via videoconference on 6 May 2020,
- having regard to the final report of the ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)) Election Observation Mission of 5 September 2019 on the Republic of Albania’s local elections of 30 June 2019, and the Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR of 11 December 2020 on the amendments to the Albanian Constitution of 30 July 2020 and to the Electoral Code,
- having regard to its Democracy support and Election coordination Group’s annual work programme for 2021,
- having regard to its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit³,
- having regard the joint statement of 8 December 2020 by more than 20 Members of the European Parliament on accession negotiations of North Macedonia and Albania,
- having regard to its previous resolutions on Albania,

¹ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0320.

² Texts adopted, P9_TA(2019)0050.

³ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2020)0168.

- having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
- having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0041/2021),
- A. whereas enlargement is one of the EU's most effective foreign policy instruments, as it contributes to extending the reach of the Union's fundamental values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peacebuilding and respect for human rights;
- B. whereas Albania has continued making sustained efforts on its path towards the EU, meeting most of the conditions put forward by the EU for holding the first intergovernmental conference;
- C. whereas the rule of law is a key benchmark for assessing a candidate country's progress towards EU accession;
- D. whereas Albania needs to keep making progress in the consolidation of democratic institutions and procedures, in ensuring the proper functioning of its judicial institutions, in the fight against corruption and in safeguarding media freedom and minority rights;
- E. whereas consistent efforts to make key reforms in Albania require the joint engagement of all stakeholders;
- F. whereas the prospect of Albania becoming a Member State based on merit is in the Union's own political, security and economic interests; whereas the quality of the necessary reforms and the country's dedication to them should determine the timetable for accession;
- G. whereas EU enlargement and the advancement of democracy, the rule of law and prosperity in the Western Balkans contribute to strengthening the security and stability of the Western Balkan region, of which Albania is part;
- H. whereas general elections will take place in Albania on 25 April 2021 and whereas the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations have not been implemented in their entirety;
- I. whereas the Commission submitted a draft negotiating framework for Albania on 1 July 2020;
- J. whereas the ongoing pandemic has clearly demonstrated that the EU and the Western Balkans must continue to tackle common challenges together;
- K. whereas Albania still needs to recover from the widespread damage caused by the 26 November 2019 earthquake and the COVID-19 pandemic, boost its civil protection and disaster response preparedness, and advance preparations for joining the Union Civil Protection Mechanism;
- L. whereas the EU has mobilised grants worth EUR 115 million for post-earthquake rehabilitation and reconstruction as part of its EUR 400 million support pledge;
- M. whereas Albania's economy has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and measures to prevent the spread of the virus are negatively affecting the national budget;

- N. whereas the EU has mobilised EUR 3,3 billion to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans, including EUR 38 million in immediate support to the health sector, EUR 467 million to build up the resilience of health systems and to cushion the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, EUR 750 million in macro-financial assistance, EUR 385 million for support to and the reactivation of the private sector and EUR 1,7 billion in preferential loans from the European Investment Bank;
 - O. whereas the EU has mobilised EUR 51 million to assist Albania in tackling COVID-19 and has made available up to EUR 180 million in macro-financial assistance;
 - P. whereas the EU is Albania's biggest trading partner and largest donor and whereas the country has benefited from EUR 1,25 billion in EU pre-accession funding since 2007;
 - Q. whereas the Economic and Investment Plan (EIP) for the Western Balkans will facilitate the region's long-term recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic and support economic development and reforms;
 - R. whereas Albanian citizens have enjoyed visa-free travel to the Schengen area since December 2010;
 - S. whereas Albanian citizens have been able to participate in student, academic and youth exchanges under the Erasmus+ programme since 2015;
 - T. whereas the EU remains fully committed to supporting Albania's strategic choice for EU integration, based on the rule of law and good neighbourly relations;
 - U. whereas Albania remains a trustworthy foreign policy partner, thanks to its efforts to advance regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations;
1. Welcomes the clear strategic orientation and commitment of Albania to EU integration, which is manifesting itself in good neighbourly relations and the continued implementation of accession-related reforms; in that regard, commends the European Council statement of 26 March 2020 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania; emphasises the importance of the integration process as a catalyst for reforms and welcomes the support it enjoys among the Albanian people;
 2. Believes that the Conference on the Future of Europe should include, as appropriate, and actively engage, representatives of Albania and other Western Balkan countries, both at the governmental and civil society levels, including young people;
 3. Supports the convening of the first intergovernmental conference without further delay, following the complete fulfilment of the conditions set by the European Council and the adoption of the negotiating framework by the Council; recalls that Albania has been a candidate country since 2014, and that since 2018, the Commission has been recommending starting accession talks;
 4. Recalls the transformative nature of the accession negotiations and notes that in order to ensure the credibility of the accession process, the fulfilment of milestones must be reflected in progress towards EU membership; recalls that rival actors are seeking to undermine further integration and the political stability of the Western Balkan countries;
 5. Considers the appointment of the chief negotiator and the negotiating team, along with

the adoption of the action plan to address the priorities set by the Council conclusions of March 2020, to be a sign of a clear political commitment to advance the EU integration process;

6. Stresses that progress towards accession under the revised enlargement methodology depends on lasting, in-depth and irreversible reforms across fundamental areas, starting with the rule of law, the effective functioning of democratic institutions and public administration, and the economy; recalls in this regard the importance of judicial reform and stepping up the fight against corruption and organised crime, along with good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation;
7. Urges the Albanian authorities to intensify their efforts to strengthen political dialogue and the functioning of the country's democratic institutions, while improving the climate for media pluralism and civil society;

Functioning of democratic institutions

8. Urges political leaders in Albania to create a climate of confidence by increasing transparency and overcoming the lack of dialogue, and expresses its serious concern about the polarised political climate and lack of sustainable cross-party cooperation that continue to hamper the democratic process; recalls the importance of constructive political dialogue for advancing the reform process and making further progress in ensuring the normal democratic functioning of Albania's institutions;
9. Recalls the joint responsibility of political forces to move on from mutual accusations, unilateral decisions and boycotts, building instead on positive examples of the consensus-building efforts, such as those leading to the 5 June 2020 agreement on electoral reform;
10. Calls on Albania's public institutions to act transparently and implement good governance practices; stresses the importance of proactive steps in making information available to civil society, media and the general public in a regular and timely fashion, in particular when it relates to issues of major public interest, such as the ongoing health emergency;
11. Stresses that the general elections of 25 April 2021 will be key for the consolidation and renewal of the country's democratic procedures and structures, and the achievement of a higher level of political stability; underlines that free and fair elections are fundamental for EU integration;
12. Expresses concern about the allegations of vote-buying and recalls that its prosecution is among the conditions set by the Council on 25 March 2020; stresses the importance of ensuring that preparations for the 2021 parliamentary elections take place in a transparent and inclusive manner; notes that all political forces, state bodies, civil society and the media have a joint duty to ensure the election campaign is transparent, credible and objective, and free from disinformation, intimidation and false accusations;
13. Underlines the importance of implementing the electoral reform measures codified in July 2020, which are in line with the OSCE/ODIHR and Council of Europe recommendations; stresses the importance of implementing the joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR of December 2020 fully and in a timely

manner; welcomes the positive outcome of the 5 June 2020 agreement, which implements some of the OSCE/ODIHR recommendations; notes the failure to build upon it and the fact that despite repeated international appeals to await the opinion of the Venice Commission, further steps have been taken without a broad cross-party consensus, resulting in the adoption of the disputed amendments to the Electoral Code in October 2020 by the Albanian Parliament;

14. Underscores the need to step up the Albanian Parliament's involvement in the EU integration process, further advancing its legislative, oversight and budgetary scrutiny capacities to ensure legal alignment with the EU *acquis*;
15. Urges Albania to improve intra-governmental coordination, to accelerate decentralisation under the territorial administrative reform, to advance public consultations at local level and to advance the public administration reform;

Rule of law

16. Recalls the paramount importance of safeguarding the rule of law through a judicial overhaul and a steady and consistent prosecution of high-level corruption; commends the progress made in implementing the comprehensive judicial reform, underpinned by the unprecedented vetting process and the establishment of the relevant institutions and specialised bodies, and calls for the acceleration of these procedures in order to achieve a tangible shift towards an accountable, independent and functional judiciary, this being a precondition for the first intergovernmental conference;
17. Stresses the need for Albania to develop a more strategic approach towards justice sector reform that addresses the increasing backlog of cases; calls for high transparency standards in the justice sector to be ensured and for tools such as previously operational online databases to be reactivated; welcomes the appointment of the new members of the Constitutional Court, which restored its functionality, and urges the Albanian institutions to swiftly conclude the appointment process, re-establishing the Constitutional Court's ability to function fully and efficiently; stresses the need to ensure the continued functioning and adequate staffing of the Court of Appeals;
18. Welcomes the fact that the High Court has partly regained its ability to function and has been reviewing the admissibility of more than a thousand cases, and encourages it to make further progress in the appointment of additional judges, in order to become fully functional and to dramatically reduce its unsustainable backlog of pending cases;
19. Expresses satisfaction that the National Bureau of Investigation has been established, that its director is performing her duties and that investigative staff are currently being recruited;
20. Stresses the need for Albania to fight corruption at all levels of society, government and administration; is concerned about the existing practice allowing the state police to receive private donations and sponsorship; notes with concern that corruption allegations continue to undermine the public's trust in the government, and democratic institutions more generally;
21. Stresses the need to ensure the effective functioning, cooperation and financial and operational independence of judicial, law enforcement and anti-corruption institutions

by providing adequate financial, technical and human resources; underlines the importance of delivering tangible results in the form of independent and impartial investigations leading to the successful prosecution of high-profile crimes, including corruption;

22. Welcomes the creation of anti-corruption bodies and notes the progress achieved in anti-corruption legislation; acknowledges that in-depth investigations by the newly established Special Structure Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK) are ongoing and that the Anti-Corruption and Organized Crime Courts are issuing indictments; stresses the need to maintain their independence in order to effectively and proactively fight against impunity and high-level corruption;
23. Calls for concrete integrity plans to be swiftly adopted and implemented within all ministries, as planned for in the Inter-Sectoral Strategy against Corruption and the action plan for its implementation; recalls the need to improve transparency and the monitoring of political party funding under the amended law on political party financing; notes the importance of effectively implementing the recommendations of the Albanian Supreme State Audit Institution;
24. Notes the increase in proactive investigations, prosecutions and final convictions targeting illicit wealth and money laundering, leading to the systematic freezing and seizure of criminal assets, and calls for reinforced prosecution and final court convictions of these cases, in line with the principles of judicial independence, due process and fair trials; underlines the extensive money laundering problems, notably in the construction and real estate sectors;
25. Welcomes the steps taken to improve the legislation and mechanisms for tackling money laundering and terrorism financing, and calls for further measures aimed at swiftly implementing the Financial Action Task Force action plan, in particular on reducing the size of the informal economy;
26. Underlines the importance of Albania's continuing efforts and systemic improvements in tackling the trafficking of humans, firearms and counterfeit goods, along with the cybercrime and terrorist threats;
27. Calls on Albania to further intensify its exhaustive and rigorous efforts to dismantle local and international criminal networks and eliminate drug production and trafficking, by building on the significant efforts it has made in recent years; welcomes the country's increased cooperation with Europol and the law enforcement institutions of EU Member States, which has led to a number of successful large-scale law enforcement operations, including through an exemplary collaboration between the Albanian and Italian authorities under the auspices of the Joint Investigation Team; encourages the Albanian authorities to swiftly finalise the posting of an Albanian liaison prosecutor to the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation (Eurojust); recommends that Albania adopt a new strategy and action plan on drugs, to fill, inter alia, the legislative gap relating to drug precursors;

Fundamental rights

28. Expresses its support for inclusive policies and calls for progress to be made in adopting measures to effectively protect the fundamental freedoms and rights of all people, with

a special focus on women, children, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTIQ+ persons;

29. Welcomes Albania's nomination of its observer to the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA), and encourages the authorities to take full advantage of FRA's expertise in order to bring Albania's legislation and practices in line with the EU *acquis* and EU standards;
30. Welcomes the update of the country's anti-discrimination legislation and calls on the authorities to step up efforts to establish solid anti-discrimination case law; urges the authorities to ensure the effective prevention and prosecution of hate speech and hate crimes, including antisemitism;
31. Notes that Albania's 2016-2020 National Action Plan for LGBTI Issues has expired and calls on the government to develop a new action plan through a transparent and inclusive consultation with civil society, and to ensure appropriate resources are assigned for its implementation; calls on the Albanian authorities to foster social acceptance of LGBTIQ+ persons, who still regularly experience discrimination and hate speech; welcomes the decision to eliminate 'conversion therapy', which is unacceptable, thereby strengthening the right to gender identity and gender expression;
32. Urges the authorities to ensure that sufficient human, technical and financial resources are provided to relevant bodies, such as the offices of the Ombudsperson, the Anti-Discrimination Commissioner and the Commissioner for the Right to Information and Data Protection, and to ensure that their respective recommendations are implemented systematically; stresses that only individuals whose independence and professionalism is beyond doubt should be appointed to these offices;
33. Calls for the creation of an effective mechanism for the prevention of gender-based violence, including harassment, domestic violence and violence against children, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and for protection and support to be given to its victims, combined with the effective and efficient prosecution of its perpetrators;
34. Reminds Albania of its calls for non-discriminatory access to public services to be ensured and further improvements to be made in the education, employment rates, and living and health conditions of people with disabilities, Roma, Egyptians and other ethnic minorities; welcomes the 2019 Poznan Declaration on Roma Integration within the EU Enlargement Process; urges the authorities to advance Roma integration policies in line with the EU Roma strategic framework;
35. Urges Albania to swiftly adopt the five remaining by-laws to ensure full implementation of the 2017 framework law on the protection of national minorities and the related rights to self-identification, the use of minority languages where necessary at local administrative level and the right to co-education in minority languages; calls on Albania to protect and promote the cultural heritage, languages and traditions of its national minorities, and to provide dedicated media space in state and local outlets in minority languages;
36. Welcomes in this context the adoption of the law on the population census to be carried out in the autumn of 2021, and calls on Albania to take all the necessary steps in order

to effectively implement it, including through the preparation of the questionnaire and the manual covering all recognised minority groups;

37. Calls on Albania to ensure that minority groups have equal opportunities and adequate representation in political life, public administration and the judiciary;
38. Calls on Albania to make further progress on measures consolidating property registration, restitution and compensation rights, implementing the law on transitional procedures of ownership, mainly by advancing in a transparent manner the process of registration of properties, and completing the comprehensive land sector reform, including in minority areas;
39. Welcomes Albania's efforts to promote tolerance and inter-religious harmony and address prejudice and discrimination, including antisemitism, as affirmed by the parliamentary approval of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, making it the first Muslim-majority country to accept the formulation; calls for continued efforts to ensure respect for freedom of expression and freedom of belief or religion;
40. Calls on the authorities to ensure freedom of assembly as a fundamental right, respecting the principle of proportionality, including during states of emergency or states of natural disaster; stresses the recommendations made by the Ombudsperson in this respect;
41. Notes the importance of addressing allegations of police misconduct and investigating and prosecuting disproportionate use of force, also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; recalls the need to eradicate ill treatment of suspects and prisoners;
42. Recalls the authorities' obligation to ensure due process for asylum seekers in compliance with Albania's international obligations, and to properly address the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, while increasing preparedness for potential increases in migratory flows and enhancing cooperation with the authorities of the Member States; calls for increased capacities to process asylum requests and investigations into reported cases of breaches of return procedures, including violations of human rights;
43. Stresses that border protection and the prevention of cross-border crime must be a priority, and must be conducted in full respect for the fundamental rights enshrined in applicable international and regional laws and principles; welcomes the launch of the first fully fledged joint operation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) outside the European Union;
44. Underlines that the contribution of Albania to the protection of the European Union's external border is of crucial importance, and calls on the EU to intensify its support for border protection in the region, and to support the needs of the Albanian authorities dealing with refugees, asylum seekers and migrants;
45. Welcomes the ongoing efforts being made by the Albanian authorities and urges them to take a robust approach to preventing, investigating, prosecuting and imposing punishments for human trafficking and the exploitation of its victims, who include children and other vulnerable groups, to increase the number of reintegration services

and to ensure witness protection;

46. Welcomes the ongoing measures and calls for further progress to be made in considerably reducing irregular migration and the number of unfounded asylum claims by Albanian nationals, including arrivals of unaccompanied minors, in the EU Member States; notes that Albania continues to fulfil visa liberalisation benchmarks;

Civil society and the media

47. Underlines the need to improve the climate for the functioning of civil society in Albania and urges the authorities to ensure meaningful, timely and representative consultations throughout the decision-making process at different governance levels and to enhance the legal and fiscal framework, thereby improving the financial sustainability of the non-governmental sector;
48. Stresses the importance of the participation of civil society organisations in regular consultations on the functioning of society, which enables the participation of citizens in the country's affairs;
49. Stresses the need to improve conditions and create an environment that fosters accountability and scrutiny of public institutions, in particular through cooperation with civil society and journalists, by ensuring they have access to justice and legal certainty; is very concerned about the alarming allegations regarding the widespread use of disinformation against investigative journalists, civil society activists and others seeking to hold powerful actors to account;
50. Notes with concern the lack of progress on freedom of expression and the obstacles to the proper functioning of the independent media;
51. Recalls the importance of ensuring quality journalism and increasing the levels of media literacy to ensure the functioning of democracy in Albania and to tackle disinformation, hate speech and fake news; calls on the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the Commission to improve coordination and address disinformation and hybrid threats that seek to undermine the EU perspective by more strategically underscoring the EU's relevance to citizens in the Western Balkans, and urges them to foster the creation of a Balkan-focused centre of excellence to counter disinformation;
52. Calls for initiatives to foster a media environment free from external influences and conducive to professional media conduct, including investigative journalism;
53. Underlines the need to strengthen self-regulation, ethical standards, independence, impartiality, financial sustainability and the reporting quality of public and private media outlets, and to enhance transparency of media ownership, funding and public advertising; calls for measures ensuring transparency of media ownership of broadcasting companies; notes the need to improve the labour and social conditions of media professionals in order to ensure quality journalism;
54. Condemns the violence, intimidation, smear campaigns and indirect political and financial pressure directed at journalists, which seriously stifle media freedom, induce self-censorship and gravely undermine efforts to uncover crime and corruption; calls on the authorities to open an investigation into the recent string of violence and unjustified detentions of journalists and immediately respond to allegations of reporters being

assaulted by police, including while in custody;

55. Welcomes the commitment of the authorities to withdraw the proposed draft amendments to the media law, and fully implement the Venice Commission's recommendations of 19 June 2020 on all future proposals; reiterates its concerns about the initially proposed measures under the so-called 'anti-defamation package' and notes that any revision of the media and communication laws should take place in a transparent and inclusive manner, making sure that the voices and opinions of civil society are heard, with the aim of improving media freedom and the work environment of independent journalists,

Socio-economic reforms

56. Encourages the Albanian Government to prioritise measures aimed at mitigating the health and socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, with particular consideration for marginalised and vulnerable groups such as Roma, Egyptians, the LGBTQI+ community, people with disabilities and single parents, while taking further steps to improve diversification, competitiveness and digitalisation, enhance the representativeness of the social dialogue and tackle the widespread informal economy;
57. Recalls that sustainable growth depends on the eradication of endemic corruption, improved transparency, legal certainty and efficiency, fair competition and the simplification of administrative procedures;
58. Encourages the Albanian authorities to strengthen social care coverage and improve access to social and healthcare services, especially for vulnerable groups, in order to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion;
59. Calls for the stepping up of concrete measures addressing demographic decline and the brain drain through active labour market policies that tackle skill mismatches and reduce long-term unemployment, particularly among the youth and the most marginalised groups; stresses the importance of creating sustainable long-term job opportunities for young people by promoting accessible, quality and inclusive education and addressing problems relating to housing; calls on the Albanian government to improve the availability and affordability of internet access, including for schooling;
60. Welcomes the positive trends in women's participation in politics, and calls for additional steps to address gender imbalances, the gender pay gap and workplace discrimination;
61. Urges the authorities to step up their efforts to eliminate child labour throughout the informal sector and to bolster the prosecution of child abuse;
62. Stresses the need to improve the visibility of and communication concerning EU aid and Union financing in Albania; recalls, in this regard, the performance reward under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance to North Macedonia and Albania and notably the substantial support the EU has provided to the Western Balkans to fight the COVID-19 pandemic;
63. Welcomes the Commission's efforts to invest more strategically in the Western Balkans through a dedicated EIP; stresses that any investment must be in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and the EU's decarbonisation target; recognises the importance

of the EIP in supporting sustainable connectivity, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth, as well in reinforcing regional and cross-border cooperation; calls for adequate co-financing and further improvements in the transparency and visibility of EU funding; stresses the need, in the context of Albania, to focus funding on the ongoing democratic transition and the fight against demographic decline and the brain drain;

The environment, energy and transport

64. Recalls that substantial efforts are still needed to meet the goals relating to energy efficiency, security of supply, emission reductions, and renewable energy and its diversification, through the transition to sustainable energy, heating and transport;
65. Encourages Albania to diversify energy production, ensure economically and environmentally sound investments in hydropower operations, and increase cost-efficient investments in wind and solar sources; urges the government to minimise the impact on biodiversity by stopping hydropower development in protected areas, in particular in areas near the Valbona and Vjosa rivers, and to establish as soon as possible the Viosa National Park, extending the whole length of the river, in line with its announcement; underlines the need to improve environmental impact assessments, strategic environmental assessments and transparency of procedures across eco-sensitive sectors and to boost the prosecution of environmental crimes; stresses the importance of improving Albania's strategy on nuclear safety and radiation protection; recalls that Albania is yet to fully align with Council Directive 2013/59/Euratom of 5 December 2013 laying down basic safety standards for protection against the dangers arising from exposure to ionising radiation;
66. Urges the authorities to ensure full compliance with the Energy Community Treaty, including by making Albania's power exchange operational, continuing to open up the market, ensuring the functional unbundling of distribution system operators and ensuring electricity market coupling; underlines the contribution of the newly launched trans-Adriatic pipeline and the upcoming connection of the converted Vlora thermal plant to regional energy security; recalls the need to complete the electricity market reform and launch the Bitola-Elbasan electricity interconnector with North Macedonia;
67. Calls for continuing progress in strengthening strategic transport networks in line with the trans-European transport network (TEN-T) regulatory framework, to advance work on the Albanian sections of the 'Blue Highway', to complete the railway sector reforms and to make further progress on the Tirana-Podgorica-Durrës rail connection;
68. Expresses deep concern about certain economic projects in Albania that have led to environmental damage in protected areas; underlines that the planning and construction of eco-sensitive tourist and energy infrastructure projects must be conducted as part of a broad country-wide consultation with civil society and local communities prior to any decision being made and must comply with international and EU norms on impact assessments and environmental protection;
69. Urges the Albanian authorities to develop a national energy strategy which guarantees full alignment with and implementation of the Paris Agreement, relevant EU climate policies, decarbonisation targets and carbon pricing instruments, in line with the European Green Deal and the political commitments made in the 2020 Sofia

Declaration; invites the Albanian authorities to adopt without delay the draft climate law and the law and decision on a mechanism for monitoring and reporting greenhouse gas emissions; requests the accelerated finalisation of the draft integrated National Energy and Climate Plan for review by the Energy Community Secretariat;

70. Calls for further efforts in the field of agriculture and rural development; believes that it is important to establish a solid system for consultations between policymakers and various interest groups in rural areas; stresses the need to develop modern, ecological and climate-friendly small- and medium-scale agriculture that ensures the livelihood of farmers and the protection of Albania's natural resources and biodiversity;
71. Recalls the need for Albania to prioritise the implementation of the new 2020-2035 national waste management strategy and the setting up of an integrated regional waste management system, and to promote recycling, close hazardous waste disposal sites, align with EU standards, especially as regards incineration, and prevent deforestation and marine plastic pollution; draws attention to the pollution of the Adriatic Sea and the frequent dumping of rubbish carried by sea currents; underlines the need to step up water quality monitoring and waste water treatment capacities and strengthen the capacities of the agencies responsible for the environment and protected areas;

Regional cooperation and foreign policy

72. Welcomes Albania's continuing efforts to promote good neighbourly relations and regional integration; underlines the importance of taking further steps to promote reconciliation with neighbours and regional cooperation, which should be underpinned by respect for fundamental EU values and a common future in the EU;
73. Calls for the creation of new opportunities for high-level political and policy dialogue with the Western Balkan countries through regular EU-Western-Balkan summits and intensified ministerial contact, in order to strengthen the political ownership of the enlargement process, and ensure stronger steering and high-level engagement, as also aimed for under the revised enlargement methodology;
74. Welcomes the constructive steps towards the resolution of outstanding bilateral issues, including a joint undertaking by Greece and Albania to refer the delimitation of maritime zones to the International Court of Justice;
75. Welcomes the inclusive steps taken to deepen regional integration, facilitate connectivity and the free movement of people, goods, capital and services and contribute to the common regional market;
76. Welcomes Albania's constructive role in multilateral initiatives, including under its chairpersonships of the Central European Free Trade Agreement and the OSCE;
77. Welcomes Albania's participation in the mini-Schengen initiative as a means to improve neighbourly relations and provide new opportunities for people and businesses in Albania;
78. Calls upon all political leaders to take urgent steps to set up the Regional Commission for the Establishment of the Facts about War Crimes and other Violations of Human Rights committed in the Territory of the Former Yugoslavia between 1 January 1991 and 31 December 2001 (RECOM), building upon the significant work carried out by the

Coalition for RECOM; urges political leaders in the Western Balkans to promote regional reconciliation and refrain from instrumentalising these topics in internal political struggles;

79. Welcomes Albania's ongoing full alignment with the common foreign and security policy decisions and declarations made since 2012 and commends its active participation in EU crisis management missions and operations, as well as its active contribution to NATO missions of strategic importance to the EU; urges Albania to comply with the EU position on the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court;
80. Underlines the need for the EU and the United States to strengthen their partnership and coordination in the Western Balkans in order to advance key reforms and improve governance and reconciliation; calls on the EEAS and the Commission to enhance support to Albania in countering malicious foreign interference from countries such as Russia, China and Iran; believes that, bearing in mind the above-mentioned alignment and Albania's EU accession process, Tirana should develop ever-closer cooperation with the EU and NATO member states on security and defence issues;

◦

◦ ◦

81. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the President of the European Council, the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States and to the President, Government and Parliament of the Republic of Albania.