

An important step on your path to the EU

Albania has come a long way since it submitted its application for EU membership back in 2009. I have had the privilege to accompany your difficult journey since 2010. Today, I am glad to see Albania's efforts bear fruit. As an EU candidate country, you are now a big step closer on your path to the European Union.

What has changed over the years is not only your country's status, from potential to actual EU candidate. Change, stimulated by the prospect of EU accession, is tangible already. Albanians benefit from visa-free travel to Schengen countries. Democratic mechanisms work better: the 2013 parliamentary elections were a clear improvement compared to previous practice. In November 2013, parliament consensually adopted a Resolution on European Integration. Earlier this year we witnessed decisive action against cultivation and trafficking of drugs. Further steps have been taken towards the reform of the judiciary by engaging with the Venice Commission. An inclusive conference on the judicial reform hosted by the President and the Minister of Justice to identify the way forward took place on 6 October.

I am fully aware not all the results may still be easily felt by all citizens. The reforms are still too often overshadowed by polarization and tensions ignited by party interests. This is unfortunate and gradually has to change. The granting of candidate status provides an excellent opportunity for such a change, and can give additional impetus to Albania's reform agenda.

Albania should now focus on key priorities, such as the rule of law, including the reform of the judiciary and continuation of the fight against corruption and organised crime. The reform of the public administration needs to continue to build a professional and de-politicised civil service. Transparency and respect for the applicable legislation, notably as regards dismissals and recruitments, needs to be ensured. Good economic governance also comes into focus. Progress on this front is essential to help create an environment more conducive to investment, employment and growth and fully use your country's potential.

It is essential both government and opposition feel ownership of the EU-related reform process and make sure it stays on track. The government needs to set a good example by scrupulously upholding the highest standards of democratic governance enabling the opposition to exercise control. The opposition has to maintain a constructive approach in exercising its democratic oversight of the government using the parliament to the full. The responsibility of both is fundamental for sustainability of the reforms beyond the next elections.

On the EU side, we will continue to provide support and guidance backed by a strong political commitment and a rigorous but fair enlargement process. Funding opportunities exist through the EU's pre-accession funds (IPA) and international financial institutions. But it is for Albania to do the work and demonstrate that recent achievements are irreversible. I am fully confident this will be case.

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This article is published on the occasion of the publication by the European Commission of its progress report on Albania, on 8 October 2014.