



The Albanian and European Union flags fly in front of the European Commission building in Brussels.

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From a European Community Enthusiast To EU Membership

Klodiana Beshku

Albania's journey toward European Union membership has been long and complex. The signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2006), the achieving of candidate status (2014), the opening of accession negotiations (2022), and the ending of the screening process (2023) have been some of the milestones along the way. Delays often were linked to the need for comprehensive reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law, good governance, and anticorruption. Since it first became a democratic country, Albania has held aspirations of greater Euro-Atlantic integration, with NATO and EU membership as its ultimate goals.

Albania realized one goal by joining NATO in 2009. Today, it remains actively engaged in the negotiation process toward its ambitions for EU membership with two opened clusters, as it works to align its institutions and policies with EU standards in hopes of eventually becoming a full member in 2030. Under these auspices, Prime Minister Edi Rama is running for a fourth mandate in the May 2025 elections.

Albania and the Initial Idea of Europe

European integration has been the destination of all Albanian governments since 1990 because the European Union has always represented a process of both European

identification and European transformation for Albanian society. Albanians have always perceived the EU as a gateway to freedom and as a return to their sphere of identity: the European one. Unlike the other five Western Balkan countries, which together with Croatia and Slovenia had all been part of Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito in a social communist system of an “unallied bloc,” Albania experienced a harsh dictatorship under the communist dictator Enver Hoxha. In this regard, Albania has experienced a different historical pace of a communist past¹ compared with the other Western Balkan countries.

During the period 1990-1991, when the regime broke up, the feeling of belonging to Europe grew even stronger. The long period of isolation² and scarcity under the communist regime led Albanians to consider Western Europe to be the sole window to the free movement of people and goods and as a sort of stairway to welfare heaven. Thus, every political struggle at the beginning of the 1990s was completely Europe-oriented, mixing in the same pot, without distinction, the concept of Europe, the European Community, and the Council of Europe.³ The mantra “*E duam Shqipërinë si gjithë Europa*” of that time⁴ referred not only to its literal meaning, “We want Albania as the rest of Europe,” but also expressed the idea that Albania had to become like the European Community, join it one day, and have the same living standards and state of mind. Unlike other EU candidates or member countries, no Albanian political party opposes or criticizes the idea of EU integration. European integration represents the only area where a political consensus is found in Albania.⁵ Only recently has criticism been made more often by experts, members of think tanks, and members of civil society, and it has mostly been directed at the Open Balkans initiative of 2021-2022, which caused concern for not being directly under the European Union umbrella.

The European Community has supported Albania’s path to democracy since the beginning of the 1990s. The first discussion about Albania in the European Parliament took place on Feb. 21, 1991, two days after the Albanian people had destroyed Hoxha’s statue in Tirana after a mass demonstration. In the debate, terms like “reunification with Europe” and “insertion in Europe” were used, an approach mostly supported by the Italian and German deputies.⁶ The role of the European Commission as a supporter of the fragile Albanian democracy was made possible through programs such as TEMPUS-PHARE and later, CARDS and IPA.⁷ This kind of support for conditionality remains crucial for the EU’s approach to Albania and will continue to do so in the future.

In the 1990s, Albania was facing a difficult transition from a centralized to a market economy. In the years immediately

after the fall of its communist regime, the country was subject to economic shocks⁸ that, combined with its social and political struggles, caused a nearly total collapse of the Albanian state after the pyramid scheme crisis of 1996-1997 was allowed to flourish by the government led by then-Prime Minister Sali Berisha. During that crisis, Albania’s economy regressed to the levels of the early 1990s, and the state system experienced corruption, was unable to attract economic investment, and had weak rule of law, which created conditions for a long transition period.

While other countries in the region were involved in ethnic conflicts during the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (1991-1999), Albania signed the Agreement on Commerce and Economic Cooperation with the European Community in 1992. Albania was the first country in the region to sign this kind of bilateral agreement,⁹ which marked its first formal step in establishing closer ties with Europe, together with becoming part of the Council of Europe in 1995. Nevertheless, for Albania, the European integration process started to have its ups and downs, most of which were related to its domestic sphere and policies. However, one thing has remained unchanged: Since 1990, European integration has consistently been a national objective and the main axis of Albania’s foreign policy strategy.¹⁰

From the Bilateral to the Regional Phase

The signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) was completed on June 12, 2006. It marked Albania’s move away from the bilateral to the regional phase in its European integration path. This milestone finally brought Albania to the accession track¹¹ and made it the third Western Balkans country to sign the SAA. The negotiations had taken 3 1/2 years, three times longer than they took for Croatia and the former Republic of Macedonia. The close relations between Albania and the EU under the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which started in 1999, were finalized with the 2007 negotiations for the SAA between the EU and Albania. After two years, the inception of the SAA on April 1, 2009, signified a more advanced contractual relationship between Albania and the EU, with mutual obligations and rights delineated. This new agreement began in December 2006, seeking to gradually integrate the country’s political, economic, and social institutions with those of the EU. The SAP and the SAA were “purely regional in character,”¹² given that they moved from bilateral trade liberalization to regional cooperation and harmonizing with EU structures,¹³ as well as regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries.

After making progress toward European integration, Albania was admitted to NATO on April 1, 2009. Visas between the EU and Albania were formally liberalized in December

2010. The opening of negotiations with the European Commission over the country's status as candidate member on Oct. 10, 2012, fell on the 100th anniversary of Albania's independence. An EU progress report in November 2012 was received with celebration by the government of the Democratic Party in Albania, which labeled the future after the report "the next hundred years of Albania."¹⁴

However, since then, Albania's path to European integration has not been smooth or easy. The EC's 2013 Enlargement Strategy featured fundamentals that outlined the key topics on the enlargement agenda: the rule of law, economic governance, and strengthening democratic institutions. The last achievement preceding EU integration was the decision of the EU General Affairs Council on June 24, 2014, granting Albania candidate status, which was supported on June 27, 2014, by the European Commission. Nearly a decade would pass before Albania would take another significant step toward European integration.

From Bad Pupil to Master of Regional Cooperation, 2012-2019

On Sept. 13, 2014, in an unprecedented move, newly elected European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced a five-year halt on EU enlargement in his "State of the EU" speech to the European Parliament. This declaration persistently discouraged the Western Balkan countries by distancing them from EU membership prospects. It also led to the realization that long-term stability and a transformation of the region would be best achieved through economic growth and stronger regional cooperation, resulting in the so-called Berlin Process¹⁵ launched by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 to fill the vacuum left in the region by Juncker. This process consisted of successive Western Balkan summits, where six EU member states (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia) and the six Western Balkan countries agreed to increase cooperation on several issues. Albania and the other Western Balkan countries engaged in discussions of soft and hard measures in regional cooperation, which were supposed to speed up European integration and regional cooperation in this process, according to the example of the Višegrad Group.

Under this process, Tirana became the seat of two regional initiatives in the process framework – the Western Balkan Fund and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office – fulfilling its aspiration to become a regional hub and to be actively engaged in the region. With this political momentum, Albania, along with the other countries of the Western Balkans, officially passed from the first phase of the bilateral agreements with the EU and the second phase of the

regional approach with the SAP to the third phase of the Berlin Process, during which it proved to be a constructive factor of regional cooperation in the region.

From the New Enlargement Methodology to a New Pace in European Integration, 2019-2023

Albania, together with North Macedonia, underwent an accession impasse between 2018 and 2021 as the European Council transformed the accession process from a technical into a political one.¹⁶ In July 2016, Albania adopted comprehensive justice reform, which was supposed to pave the way for negotiations between Albania and the EU, but the opening of the access negotiations was twice postponed. The European Commission gave the positive *avis* to the opening of accession negotiations with Albania in 2018 and 2019, but the efforts for thorough judicial reform did not pay off. This neglect gave way to a decision-making process regarding these countries that continued for nearly four years.

After the European Council had blocked the process for both Albania and North Macedonia with the vetoes of 2018 and 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted on linking enlargement to reforming the whole SAP, managing to achieve a reconsideration of the latter. In February 2020, the European Commission approved a revised methodology for the enlargement process, and the accession negotiations process seemed to restart.¹⁷ The presentation of a new methodology of enlargement was made in February 2020, and the next month, the European Council decided to formally open accession negotiations with both countries. Nevertheless, the intergovernmental conference that would have meant the formal start of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia was once more blocked in June 2021 by Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia, which was related to historical legacies between the two.

This second halt of European integration for the region opened the way to a new regional initiative in the framework of a "Western Balkans for the Western Balkans" approach.¹⁸ Given that the governments of the Western Balkans had started to consider the Berlin Process as a substitute for EU enlargement,¹⁹ on the initiative of the leaders of Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, the "Mini Schengen" initiative of 2019 was turned into the Open Balkans initiative in 2021, aiming at closer collaboration among the three countries in the free movement of goods, people, and capital, independently from the EU. The "soft pressure" that Albania and Serbia were putting on the EU through these individual initiatives seemed to finally work. The Bulgarian veto was overcome, and the first intergovernmental conferences

opening the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania took place in Brussels in July 2022.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Western Balkans became a contentious geopolitical sphere of influence for the European Union. On Oct. 6, 2023, at an informal meeting of heads of state in Granada, EU leaders declared that enlargement was a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity."²⁰ The Berlin Process Summit convened in Tirana on Oct. 16, 2023, marking its first time in the region. That meeting achieved progress on the Common Regional Market and enabled participants to discuss the coming New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and to open the Office of the College of Europe in Tirana, along with enrolling students for the 2024-2025 academic year. The site of the meeting demonstrated the EU's complete advocacy for Western Balkan countries joining the EU.

In this regard, the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, proposed by the European Commission in November 2023, resembles a European Union Marshall Plan for the Western Balkans. It will provide increased financial investment and loans for a total of 6 billion euros for the period 2024-2027 in exchange for socioeconomic and fundamental reforms.²¹ The first direct effect of this plan was the inclusion of Montenegro and Albania in the Single European Payments Area, being the first-ever enlargement of countries to join this area. In line with the Growth Plan, Albania presented an ambitious Reform Agenda in October 2024²² to the European Commission and expects to become a member of the European Union by 2030.

Recent Developments

After one year of the screening process (2022-2023),²³ Albania opened the EU negotiations on the Fundamentals (First) Cluster at the beginning of October 2024 and opened them for the Sixth Cluster, on External Relations, in mid-December 2024. The opening of both clusters demonstrates a strategic and well-thought-out move by the Albanian side.

The First Cluster, on Fundamentals and Functioning of Democratic Institutions, opens first and closes last. It is thought that judicial reform will advantage Albania's position well compared with other countries in the region. Albania constitutes a good example of a *reformateur* under the EU's oversight related to the reform of the justice system because the rule of law is a crucial prerequisite for healthy institutions, the consolidation of democracy, and the economic development of a country on its way to joining the EU. Although the Special Prosecution against Corruption and Organized Crime – a body created in the process of

justice reform – has delivered on several high-profile cases regarding former ministers, members of parliament, a deputy member of parliament, municipalities, directors, and other high-profile officials, corruption remains an area of concern in Albania. The reform required all prosecutors to submit to a vetting process, which is at the end in the first instance, a fact that represents a major milestone, with 11 remaining cases out of 805 as of Oct. 3, 2024. For the first time,²⁴ Albania was included in the Rule of Law Report of the European Commission. The report highlights the fact that the new Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2024-2030 is being prepared, while the implementation of the current strategy has faced shortcomings.²⁵

The Sixth Cluster covers several important aspects of foreign policy, including Albania's alignment with EU policies on international relations, trade, and diplomatic affairs. Albania is a good example of a *reformateur* under the EU, comprising the areas of foreign policy that represent full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy²⁶ and good regional relations following the Berlin process series. Albania is considered a stabilizing factor in the region and a champion of regional cooperation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Albania remains actively engaged in the process of EU accession, working to align its institutions and policies with EU standards as it hopes eventually to become a full EU member. Albania has tried to play a major role in the geopolitical environment of the region and conflict zones all over the world through U.N. and NATO bodies. The fact that Albania is a U.S. ally and is committed to the EU is well known in the EU's member states. Despite challenges and backsliding, Albania has done everything right from a formal perspective: It is already a NATO member, is free from the complications of the Yugoslav wars, has no bilateral disputes, and is a strong ally of the U.S. and Italy with a perfect geopolitical position. Thus, it is well positioned to contribute to the stability of the Western Balkans. As its accession process is well on track and it is one of the countries supported by the EU's New Growth Plan, the chances of Albania achieving its goal to become an EU member by 2030 appear promising.

Nevertheless, it faces several remaining multifaceted challenges with political, economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Corruption remains deeply ingrained; thus, the state and society must make joint efforts to curb it, including the vigilant enforcement of anticorruption laws.

Other challenges include concerns about the intersection of business and political interests and market concentration, which were expressed by the European Commission in

2022. The 2022 European Commission Report on Albania suggested that anticorruption measures continued to have a limited impact in particularly vulnerable areas like property, roads, cadaster, customs, tax administration, education, health, and public procurement and that the country should step up efforts on the alignment of its legislative framework with the EU in the areas of concessions and public-private partnerships. There has been a suspension of the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development payments due to doubts about corruption, a preventive measure taken by the EC after an investigation by the European Anti-Fraud Office on suspected misuse of EU funds supporting farmers and the agricultural sector. There have also been concerns in the area of freedom of expression and media freedom. Concern has been expressed about improving the protection of

fundamental rights by fully aligning the law on personal data protection with the EU acquis, adopting pending legislation on the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and effectively implementing the EC's 2024 National Agenda on Child Rights.

Fear about formal compliance with EU norms remains, since European integration should be transformative for Albania, not merely a formal destination to be achieved. The judicial system also needs strengthening to make it more independent, efficient, and accountable. Albania must meet these challenges to increase its credibility and its readiness to join the EU. Albania's slow economic development, lack of free elections, and high-level corruption have been its main problems during its long road to joining the EU.



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Endnotes

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