2016 Commission report on Albania

2016/2312(INI) - 03/02/2017 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Knut FLECKENSTEIN (S&D, DE) on the Commission's report of 2016 on Albania.

Members recalled that Albania has made progress towards accession to the European Union. They welcomed **Albania's continuous progress on EU-related reforms**, in particular the adoption of constitutional amendments paving the way for a deep and comprehensive judicial reform.

Towards the accession of Albania to the EU: Members fully supported Albania's accession to the EU, and called for the accession negotiations to be opened as soon as there is credible and sustainable progress in the implementation of comprehensive judicial reform. They expected Albania to consolidate the progress achieved and to maintain the pace of progress on implementation of all key priorities.

Whilst recalling the main priorities for Albania regarding the strengthening of reforms leading to EU accession (particularly in constitutional affairs and the institutional reform of the judiciary) Members welcomed **the new justice reform strategy for 2017-2020**, as well as the increased budgetary means for implementation.

They called for further electoral reforms and called on Albania's political parties to respect both the spirit and the letter of the law on the exclusion of criminal offenders from public office.

Overall, Members noted the efforts towards a more citizen-friendly public administration and wanted to see further improvements regarding recruitment and promotion procedures on the basis of merit and performance.

Fight against corruption: Members stressed the need for a more adequate legal framework for conflicts of interest, the regulation of lobbying and better interinstitutional cooperation, especially between police and prosecution services. They felt that a stricter framework was necessary for the fight against organized crime and drug trafficking.

Members remained concerned that corruption remains high and prevalent in many areas and continues to pose a serious problem, eroding people's trust in public institutions. They were also concerned that key anti-corruption institutions continue to be subject to political interference and have limited administrative capacities.

Further measures are also necessary to fight against arms trafficking.

Respecting the rights of minorities and asylum seekers: Members urged the competent authorities to continue improving the climate of inclusion and tolerance for all minorities in the country. They underlined the need to improve access to employment and all public and social services, education, health, social housing and legal aid for **Roma and Egyptians**.

Members encouraged Albania to improve further its legal framework for refugees. They called for a further strengthening of cooperation between the EU and Albania in order to protect refugees' rights in line with international standards and EU fundamental values. In this regard, they expressed concern at the recent rise in cases of **human trafficking**, notably unaccompanied minors, women and girls. Members were also concerned about discrimination against and lack of appropriate measures for the protection of women and girls belonging to disadvantaged and marginalised groups, as well as LGBTI people.

Media independence: the report reiterated the critical importance of professional and independent private and public service media. It called for measures to raise the professional and ethical standards of and prevalence of regular work contracts for journalists, to enhance the transparency of government advertising in the media, and to ensure the independence, impartiality and accountability of the regulatory authority and the public broadcaster.

Economic performance: Members urged improved enforcement of contracts and better tax collection, and implementation of the judicial reforms in order to improve the business environment. Further efforts are needed to fight the informal economy.

The report highlighted the fact that the environmental impact of hydropower plants is often not properly assessed. Members advised the government to consider the establishment of a Vjosa National Park and to abandon plans for new hydropower plants along the Vjosa river and its tributaries. Overall, more measures are required for further alignment with EU legislation in the field of energy.

Albanian asylum seekers: the report noted that the number of asylum applications lodged by Albanians in EU Member States that have been deemed unfounded has **increased again**. It urged the government to take immediate and determined action to address this phenomenon.

Neighbourhood relations: lastly, Members underlined the importance of ensuring good neighbourly relations, which remain essential as an integral part of the enlargement process. They welcomed Albania's constructive and proactive role in promoting regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations with other enlargement countries and neighbouring EU Member States. In this regard, they commended both Albania and Serbia on their continued commitment to improving bilateral relations. However, they noted the recent frictions in relations between **Albania and Greece**, and recommended that both sides abstain from actions or statements that could have a negative impact on relations.