Report on the 2019-2020 Commission Reports on Albania

2019/2170(INI) - 10/03/2021 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted an own-initiative report by Isabel SANTOS (S&D, PT) on the 2019-2020 Commission reports on Albania.

Members welcomed Albania's clear strategic orientation towards EU integration and the European Council declaration of 26 March 2020 on the opening of accession negotiations with Northern Macedonia and Albania. Albania has been a candidate country since 2014 and since 2018 the Commission has recommended the opening of accession negotiations.

The Albanian authorities are invited to intensify their efforts to strengthen political dialogue and the functioning of the country's democratic institutions while improving the conditions for media pluralism and civil society.

Functioning of democratic institutions

Recalling that free and fair elections are fundamental for EU integration, the report stressed that the general elections on 25 April 2021 will be essential for the consolidation and renewal of the country's democratic procedures and structures and for achieving a higher level of political stability.

Members called on Albania's public institutions to act in a transparent manner and to establish good governance practices. Albania should improve co-ordination within government, speed up decentralisation, advance public consultation at local level and push-ahead with public administration reform. The involvement of the Albanian Parliament in the EU integration process should be strengthened with a view to ensuring harmonisation of its legislation with the EU acquis.

Rule of law

Members reiterated the importance of safeguarding the rule of law through a judicial reform and steady and consistent prosecution of high-level corruption. They called for the acceleration of procedures to enable tangible progress towards an accountable, transparent, independent and functional judiciary as a precondition for the first intergovernmental conference.

Highlighting the significant problems of money laundering, particularly in the construction and real estate sectors, the report called for the strengthening of prosecution and final convictions of such cases, as well as measures to reduce the size of the informal economy. Albania is called upon to step up its efforts to dismantle local and international criminal networks and to eliminate drug production and trafficking.

Fundamental rights, civil society and media

Members called for progress towards the adoption of measures that effectively protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of all, with a particular focus on women, children, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTQI+ people.

The report stressed the need to improve conditions and create an environment for accountability and oversight of public institutions, in particular through cooperation with civil society and journalists by ensuring that they have access to justice and legal certainty.

Concerned about the lack of progress in the area of freedom of expression, Members stressed the need to strengthen self-regulation, ethical standards, independence, impartiality, financial sustainability and news quality of public and private media as well as to improve transparency in media ownership, financing and public advertising.

Socio-economic reforms

The report urged the Albanian government to:

- prioritise measures to mitigate the health and socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic with a particular focus on marginalised and vulnerable groups;

- strengthen social care coverage and improve access to health and social services, especially for vulnerable groups, in order to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion;

- take concrete measures to address demographic decline and brain drain, as well as further measures to tackle gender pay gaps and discrimination in the workplace;

- diversify its energy production, ensure economically and environmentally sustainable investments in hydropower generation and increase cost-effective investments in wind and solar energy;

- develop a national energy strategy ensuring full compliance with and implementation of the Paris Agreement and the decarbonisation objectives, in line with the European Green Deal.

Regional cooperation

The report welcomed Albania's continued efforts to foster good neighbourly relations and regional integration. It stressed the importance of adopting new measures to encourage reconciliation with neighbours and regional co-operation, which should be based on respect for the EU's fundamental values.

Members called for the creation of new opportunities for high-level political and policy dialogue with the Western Balkan countries through regular EU-Western Balkans summits and intensified ministerial contacts.