

Albania's European path: Making significant progress and ambitious for more

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Opinion

EU policymakers should be in no doubt about Albania's commitment to open accession talks, writes Ditmir Bushati.



Ditmir Bushati | *Photo credit: Press Association*

On Tuesday 6th February, the European Commission published its long-awaited strategy document entitled: 'A credible enlargement perspective for an enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans'. The document asserts that EU membership of the Western Balkans is in the political, security and economic interests of the European Union, and that the credible prospect of accession could be a driving force for transformation in the region, helping to contribute to a stable, strong and united Europe based on common values.

The strategy document talks of “Albania making significant progress on the European path” and that “the Commission is ready to prepare recommendations to open accession negotiations, on the basis of fulfilled conditions.”

This is an historic opportunity; for more than 20 years European leaders have talked about their support for the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. We are encouraged that the time to put these words into action has now arrived. We all have a responsibility to make this part of a broader pro-European agenda to build a stronger, united and more democratic European Union, as set out by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union speech last September.

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Let there be no doubt about Albania’s commitment. We are determined to turn this opportunity into reality. We understand that the EU expects concrete results from us and that the process of assessing these results will be tough but fair, and based on merit. We welcome this.

There is a strong consensus among Albanian citizens to join the EU and we have consistently taken positive steps towards alignment with EU standards. Polls show that 80 per cent of Albanians see their future as part of Europe, with shared values and a common respect for the importance of the rule of law, citizens’ rights and good governance.

Enhanced economic cooperation is also vital for our employment strategies; the EU is Albania's biggest trading partner accounting for €2.82bn of our exports. We also have a positive net contribution to make towards the security of Europe, border enforcement, the fight against organised crime, international terrorism and the management of migration flows. Our foreign policy is in full alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy.

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Our government is making steady progress in all the five areas Brussels has specified as prerequisites before accession talks can be opened: administrative reform, protection of human rights, the battle against corruption, reform of the justice system and tackling organised crime.

We know from practical experience that the implementation of reform is not straightforward, as we face political opposition from recidivist elements in our society who are resistant to change, and who have interests in keeping the “bad old ways”. But we are determined to succeed and to make our

reforms irreversible; we take courage from the knowledge that reform can indeed involve some pain in some quarters, and when it does so this also means that it is actually working, and having a real impact.

Last year the Albanian parliament passed laws to reform the judicial system which radically changed the constitution and established a new vetting procedure for the judiciary. This reform has also had a direct impact on our fight against corruption and organised crime. We note with some pride that the model for this which we, with EU advice and assistance, developed two years ago is now being proposed for all the Western Balkan countries, albeit in a less comprehensive form.

"By the European Council meeting in June, we are confident we will be able to make our case, convert the sceptics and advance to formal negotiations"

The work we have achieved so far gives us a strong platform for further work to be carried out in the framework of the accession negotiations. In this respect, Albania can be considered a regional leader, and we believe that we deserve fair recognition for our record of progress.

It is important to remember that the accession negotiations can themselves act as an important catalyst to accelerate reform and embed it in society when the perspective of membership is clearly seen by the citizens as something that is more than a dream. It becomes real when it is visible on the horizon and is approaching. The negotiating process will give us this encouragement to keep up the momentum towards even greater integration and bring our citizens closer to Europe.

We know that there are still sceptical views about EU enlargement in some countries. But, we also know that there is no alternative. There is much to be done over the next few months. We welcome the fact that Bulgaria has made enlargement a key priority for its EU Council Presidency. We will have the opportunity to explore this at a Western Balkans summit Sofia will host in May. By the European Council meeting in June, we are confident we will be able to make our case, convert the sceptics and advance to formal negotiations.

About the author

Ditmir Bushati is Albania's Minister of Foreign Affairs

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