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# Albania's EU Accession Sprint: Balancing Momentum, Reform, and EU Scrutiny

Albania has emerged as one of the most rapidly advancing EU candidate countries, having opened all negotiation clusters and aiming to complete talks by 2027. Its progress is driven by strong geopolitical alignment, broad public support, and Prime Minister Edi Rama's active engagement with EU leaders. Yet rapid advancement masks notable challenges. Albania's limited political pluralism and modest EU accession engagement from civil society, the private sector and local governments raise concerns about the sustainability and inclusiveness of reforms. Key reforms on media regulation, judicial reform, environmental protection and public procurement are still pending. This policy brief assesses Albania's political dynamics and reform trajectory. It argues that insufficient EU due diligence on key reforms risks weakening the EU's transformative power. Ensuring credible progress requires stronger domestic ownership and more rigorous and sincere EU assessments as Albania enters a decisive phase of accession.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

After enlargement gained renewed momentum following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the process has, three years on, come under significant strain in most Southeast European candidate countries. That is with the exception of Albania and Montenegro. Albania, in particular, is advancing in the accession process at an unprecedented pace, having opened all six negotiation clusters in just over a year.

However, in order to continue negotiations at full speed, Tirana first needs to meet the so-called interim benchmarks under the fundamentals cluster – a precondition to start closing the first negotiation chapters. The objective of doing so by the end of 2025 demands a serious political and societal commitment. The European Commission considers Albania's overall goal of concluding membership negotiations by the end of 2027 as ambitious but 'on track', if it maintains its reform momentum and fosters 'inclusive political dialogue'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief outlines the main conclusions of a fact-finding mission to Tirana on 5 – 7 October 2025, that was jointly conducted by experts from four European think tanks: The Clingendael Institute, Carnegie Europe, the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), and the Jacques Delors Institute. The mission was organized by the Jacques Delors Institute.

<sup>2</sup> European External Action Service, "[Enlargement Package shows progress towards EU membership for key enlargement partners](#)", 4 November 2025.

Prime Minister Edi Rama, himself an artist by background, aspires to turn Albania into a model “artwork” of EU integration. Yet, unlike individualist artistic creation, EU accession requires a comprehensive, whole-of-society effort – something that is difficult to achieve in a highly centralised system.

This policy brief examines Albania’s political dynamics and reform trajectory, assessing the current state of the country’s EU accession process and identifying critical political and technical reform hurdles. The analysis draws on findings from a scoping mission to Tirana conducted in early October 2025 by a consortium of four European think tanks which have been dedicated to researching EU enlargement with the Western Balkans for many years.

## Unprecedented dynamism in Albania’s EU accession path

At face value, Albania’s recent progress on its EU integration path can be described as a success story. The country is one of the few candidates to demonstrate both a strong government push for and a broad public embrace of the EU path. With the experience of a harsh communist past and subsequent slow democratic transition still in mind, the Albanian government and society alike seem to sense a unique window of opportunity to make the country an EU member, riding on a wave of EU goodwill and geopolitical momentum.

Albania’s firm anchoring in the Western geopolitical camp also works to its advantage: Albania has been a NATO member since 2009 and fully aligns its foreign and security positions with the EU, including sanctions against Russia. Albania will host NATO’s 2027 summit, having already organised a 2022 EU-Western Balkans Summit and the European Political Community (EPC) gathering in May 2025. What is more, the country currently faces no major regional or neighbourly issues of the kind that have obstructed other Western Balkan candidates.

A key figure in these developments is Prime Minister Edi Rama. He has skilfully cultivated

relations with key EU leaders in the EU institutions and Member States. Drawing on personal ties with the likes of “Emmanuel” (Macron), “Giorgia” (Meloni), and “Ursula” (Von der Leyen), Rama has recently invested virtually all his political capital in advancing Albania’s accession, which he now considers to be again attainable – a notable shift from his sceptical tone before Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine started in 2022. Rama’s renewed confidence in Albania’s accession is convincing but may be fragile, as it remains untested by any potential setbacks.

Tirana aims to complete its accession negotiations by the end of 2027 and to enter the Union in 2030. The country has opened all negotiation clusters. At the end of 2025, Tirana also seeks to secure a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) on the key fundamentals chapters – 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security) – which is a step that would pave the way for closing the first negotiation chapters. This will also be the first test of the government’s ability to meet multiple benchmarks and start implementing sectoral reforms.

Beyond the political dimension, Albania’s belonging to the broader European public sphere is slowly advancing through tourism, sport, and popular culture, fostering growing people-to-people connections with the rest of Europe. Tourist visits to Albania have more than doubled in the past few years, accounting for a record 11.7 million in 2024.<sup>3</sup> Planeloads of Dutch tourists now land in Tirana several times a week, having witnessed the country’s beauty in the popular TV show ‘Wie is de Mol?’ or been inspired by the travel experiences of relatives.<sup>4</sup> In short, Albania is gradually entering Western Europe’s public consciousness. Importantly, this is yet to translate into overall EU public support. According to the latest Eurobarometer, 45% of EU citizens now support the country’s EU

3 Politico, “[Albania’s Jale: A Hidden Gem of Tourism](#),” accessed November 2025,

4 AVROTROS, [Wie is de Mol?, “Albanië was de geheime bestemming van seizoen 22”](#), accessed November 2025.

accession once the country meets the necessary criteria, compared to 44% indicating their opposition.<sup>5</sup> As support for the far-right and enlargement-sceptical political forces continues to spread across Europe, sustained public and political support from the EU cannot be taken for granted.<sup>6</sup> Hence, there is a strong strategic imperative for Albania to present a clear case for its accession to the EU in the next few years.

## Political and societal inclusivity

Albania's commitment and ambitious planning have been widely praised by both foreign diplomats and local stakeholders alike. Yet, accounts diverge significantly on the depth and sustainability of the democratic transformation, the inclusivity of the process and the sincerity of political actors.

Behind all success stories lies a more critical reading of reform dynamics and democratic performance. Albania's political system can hardly be described as competitive. Prime Minister Rama's Socialist Party (SP) controls the country unchallenged, holding the executive, a comfortable majority in Parliament (83 out of 140 seats), and 57 of the 61 municipal administrations. After 12 years in power, the SP faces a fragmented and weakened opposition. The Democratic Party (DP) of Sali Berisha, once the main rival, is now widely seen as divided, inward-looking and lacking credibility. Its recent election campaign leaned heavily on populist rhetoric. Berisha is subjected to US sanctions for "significant corruption".

Beyond the opposition's own shortcomings, the governing SP has sought to consolidate its power through practices that go against EU standards or run counter to the spirit of EU integration.

According to the OSCE/ODIHR, the May 2025 parliamentary elections were marred by an insufficient level playing field, voter pressure, and cases of misuse of public resources.<sup>7</sup> More recently, the government decided to merge the parliamentary committees on foreign and EU affairs – effectively transferring leadership of the EU integration process from the opposition to the ruling SP. EU accession has thus become an almost entirely government-driven endeavour.

Importantly, Albania's limited political pluralism brings about a need for Rama's SP government to show more self-restraint than is currently manifested, even if the political situation cannot be blamed solely on the SP. For the EU, the issue poses a key question: Does Brussels foresee EU accession as a means to achieve a deep political transformation rather than mere institutional alignment?

Albania's central administration appears to be highly mobilised, reflecting a renewed belief in the credibility of the accession process. Yet, constraints in human resources are a cause for concern, especially as the workload to transpose EU legislation is immense – over 500 laws and decrees need to be adopted and implemented in the next two years. As in other candidate countries, a shortage of technical expertise and skills, combined with excessive turnover, risk slowing down the accession process.

At the local level, the situation seems equally challenging. While much of the EU *acquis* directly affects local governance, municipalities report a lack of ownership in the process. The most recent European Commission assessment points to, amongst other things, the need for Albania to "strengthen the capacity of local governments", citing "a pressing need to increase local governments' own revenues". The Commission also mentions limited progress on decentralisation, albeit with some positive developments.<sup>8</sup>

5 Importantly, there are many differences between Member States. 74% of the Swedes support Albania's EU accession, compared to just 29% of the Czechs. For all data on public support in the EU Member States, see: [Eurobarometer report 2025: Attitudes towards EU Enlargement](#), p.39.

6 DW, "[Far-right parties surge across Europe](#)", accessed November 2025.

7 OSCE ODIHR, [Final Report](#), 23 October 2025

8 European Commission, "[Albania Report 2025](#)", p. 23

Albania's civil society is also only partially engaged. While the NGO sector itself remains under-organised, Civil Society Organisation (CSO) representatives denounce the limited commitment from the government to engage in inclusive consultations on key legislative reforms. Combined with the frequent use of fast-track parliamentary procedures, this raises concerns about the quality of adopted legislation. While the current NGO landscape may not be fully sustainable, Albania could take steps to ensure enhanced CSO access to policymaking and more diversified funding sources, for example through the introduction of tax incentives encouraging private sector support for civil society. Similarly, the private sector itself will need to become more involved to adequately prepare for EU membership.

## Key reforms ahead

PM Rama projects strong confidence that his government will deliver on the EU integration agenda, suggesting that any remaining uncertainty over Albania's accession lies primarily with a potential EU inability to take decisions. What is clear, however, is that for many EU Member States, technical conditionality on key reforms will remain essential, regardless of Rama's own confidence and personalised relations with their leaders. In that sense, developments – or the lack thereof – in several key policy areas remain a cause for concern. These include electoral law and political party financing, the criminal code, media regulation, and the regulation of land appropriation and the illegal occupation of public spaces. Many of these reforms are essential for a positive assessment in the upcoming IBAR report. Given the scope of the pending work, however, it remains unclear how Albania could realistically meet these requirements within such a short timeframe. We highlight three areas of concern.

First, the Albanian media landscape remains a largely unregulated space, vulnerable to political influence and economic pressures. The enforcement of key laws on media financing and defamation is weak. Media ownership is highly concentrated in the hands of a few

private entities that are also actively engaged in infrastructure development and construction, of which some are close to the government.<sup>9</sup> This ultimately leads to self-censorship among journalists. Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) also remain a persistent challenge. While the EU has supported the creation of a consultation platform to advance media reform with some positive results, meaningful improvement must now come from the government itself. Legislative steps are needed to curb business influence over media ownership, to address SLAPPs, and to guarantee journalists' safety. The decriminalisation of defamation – a long-standing recommendation – remains a key prerequisite as well.<sup>10</sup>

Second, in the field of anti-corruption measures and judicial reform, Albania has undertaken a thorough vetting process for judges and prosecutors. While this process has helped to cleanse the system, it has also created a significant backlog of cases due to the shortage of qualified judges. The Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) enjoys public respect and has taken steps to prosecute high-level officials from both the government and the opposition, thereby building a track record that is valued by the EU.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, SPAK's full independence – particularly amid ongoing leadership changes – is not yet firmly secured. NGOs have also raised questions regarding SPAK's own accountability, citing concerns about judicial excesses and the organisation's methods for making arrests.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, structural imbalances have left judges relatively weak and hesitant to rule against prosecutorial requests. Justice reform, though advancing, therefore remains incomplete.

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9 See Balcani Caucaso, "[Media Freedom in Albania: A Shadow Report](#)"; Media Ownership Monitor Albania, "[Findings: Media Concentration](#)"; AidData, "[Profile of Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels](#)".

10 European Commission, "[Albania Report 2025](#)", p. 7.

11 Final convictions in high-level corruption cases rose to 30 in 2024, see European Commission, "[Albania Report 2025](#)", p. 31.

12 Interviews in Tirana.

Third, the implementation of EU environmental and public procurement standards remains problematic. While Albania is the first country to install an AI minister to enhance the efficiency and impartiality of public procurement decisions taken by the government, compliance with EU standards remains uneven. Existing loopholes are often exploited to advance alternative political or economic interests – notably in tourism development and Tirana's ongoing construction boom. The new Vlora Airport, planned right next to the protected Narta nature reserve, provides a case in point. Construction began in 2021 after enigmatic tendering procedures and without all the required permits. Problematic is pressure from outside powers in this respect. In an attempt to boost relations with US President Trump, Albania bypassed public procurement procedures when granting strategic investor status to the investment company of Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, for constructing a luxury resort on Albania's coastal Sazan Island. A deal with a UAE investor on the Port of Dürres also raised criticism from the EU and a cancellation of planned EU investments through its Western Balkans Investment Framework.<sup>13</sup> Waste management remains another major challenge, with illegal dumping sites continuing to harm the environment.

## The EU approach

Albania's EU integration raises broader questions about the EU's ability to effectively steer the country's reform processes. On the one hand, the EU institutions appear to be well aware of the challenges outlined above. EU assessments are relatively sharp, and from what is publicly known, private messaging towards the Albanian government is equally on point. In that sense, the kind of political steering the EU seeks to exercise is indeed taking place. The EU's latest enlargement package – essentially an annual progress report of which the 2025 iteration was just published – also offers a realistic and detailed account of Albania's reform

development and remaining shortcomings, even if it could benefit from more clearly articulated overall conclusions.<sup>14</sup>

Where difficulties arise is in the EU's public political communication. Publicly, Commission officials and Member State representatives mostly praise Albania for its reform drive and geopolitical alignment. As such, the EU's desire for a success story appears to hinder a more realistic public appraisal of the pitfalls identified in the EU's own Enlargement Package Albania report. This translates into a weakened ability of the EU to keep Albania accountable on its reform path.

The EU also faces internal constraints. While all EU Member States currently support Albania's accession path, political changes in the member states may result in blockades at key intermediary steps and, eventually, during the ratification of the eventual accession treaty. The most recent Eurobarometer moreover points to low public support for further enlargement in Member States like France, Germany, the Czech Republic and Austria.<sup>15</sup> As such, the success of accession also hinges on more proactive EU internal engagement.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Albania currently enjoys a strong enlargement momentum, driven by a high political and administrative commitment and favourable geopolitical circumstances. It is also facilitated by the personalised ties of Prime Minister Edi Rama with EU leaders, as well as by the EU's need for more success stories in the region. Yet political momentum alone cannot compensate for insufficient diligence on reforms, as well as on an outstanding amount of work that still lies ahead.

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13 Euractiv, [“Germany Company Sues Albania Over Controversial Port Project”](#), accessed November 2025.

14 European Commission, [“Albania Report 2025”](#)

15 European Commission, [Eurobarometer Report 2025: Attitudes towards EU Enlargement](#)

Displaying a further political willingness and technical capacity to tackle the remaining critical issues will be key for the country in the next phase of the accession negotiations. These include electoral law, judicial reform and the criminal code, media regulation and the enforcement of EU environmental and public procurement standards. Moreover, the rapid pace of accession talks, without a comprehensive whole-of-government, political, and societal approach, has so far limited domestic ownership of the process. If this continues, Albania's EU integration risks delivering formal compliance rather than substantive reform, thereby undermining the transformative potential of the accession process.

Albania's accession process is a key test for the EU's ability to act on enlargement in line with its self-proclaimed enlargement momentum. Contrary to the mood that can be felt in key EU capitals, that test has already started. Already this winter, the EU is to make important decisions about adopting the IBAR report. That is a good moment for the European Union to make use of the current momentum and, thereby, EU leverage, to maintain sufficient due diligence on the country's accession reforms. The EU can and should praise the positive steps that have been taken, but should be equally clear that the challenging phase of implementing changes and closing chapters still lies ahead.

Albania's accession process also raises the need for enhanced EU internal deliberations. Discussion among member states on the parameters of a new generation of accession treaties is just around the corner, rendering the need for adequate preparation. As such, EU institutions and member states would do well to boost debates on Albania's (and Montenegro's) accession treaty, as well as to reach consensus on the balance between and the sequencing of EU internal reform and further enlargement. In this regard, Commissioner Kos's proposals on safeguards and transition periods, which

PM Rama has indicated openness to, provide a welcome starting point for discussions.<sup>16</sup>

The European Commission, other EU institutions and the EU Member States could consider the following recommendations to sustain Albania's reform momentum while ensuring the credibility and transformative power of the accession process:

1. Exercise due diligence in the IBAR assessment: The EU would do well to assess Albania's progress on the fundamentals chapters with particular care. While maintaining the country's accession momentum is essential, granting a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) before the end of 2025 should not be treated as an objective in itself.
2. Balance positive messaging with more honesty and critical transparency: In their public communications, EU representatives could continue to value Albania's role as a strong geopolitical ally in the Western Balkans, while also conveying clear and factual assessments of reform shortcomings. Such transparency would help to maintain democratic accountability, inform citizens, and reinforce the transformative nature of enlargement.
3. Defend political pluralism and inclusiveness: The EU would do well to speak out more clearly against developments that undermine political competition. Even in the absence of a strong opposition, it remains vital to encourage government self-restraint and to ensure that opposition parties, local authorities, and civil society actors have a meaningful role in the integration process.
4. Expand inclusive consultation mechanisms: Building on the relatively successful EU-supported media policy consultation platform, the EU could initiate similar participatory formats with other stakeholders – such as the private sector, civil society, or

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16 Financial Times, [“EU moves to prevent ‘Trojan horses’ from joining bloc”](#), accessed November 2025; Reporteri.net, [“Rama: Albania ready to join the EU even without veto right”](#), accessed November 2025.

local governance – to strengthen engagement and domestic ownership.

5. Maintain close support for justice sector reforms: The EU could continue to monitor developments in the judiciary, offer targeted support to address capacity gaps among judges, e.g. through offering financial assistance to reduce vacant positions, while safeguarding the independence and integrity of SPAK and other anti-corruption institutions.
6. Speak out clearly on the need for the protection of environmental and procurement standards: The EU would do well to highlight the importance of aligning environmental protection, waste management, and public procurement practices with the EU *acquis*, ensuring transparency and sustainability in major infrastructure and investment projects. At the same time, it could warn against ‘strategic investor status’ deals that undermine EU rules.
7. Prepare the EU for Albania’s accession: Within the Union, discussions on Albania’s EU accession (and that of other candidates) could be pursued much more proactively – both politically and societally – to ensure preparedness and to avoid future ratification bottlenecks once accession becomes imminent. Enhanced public awareness of Albania could further be spurred through targeted tourism campaigns and media visibility, drawing on successful examples in the Netherlands.

### About the Clingendael Institute

Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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