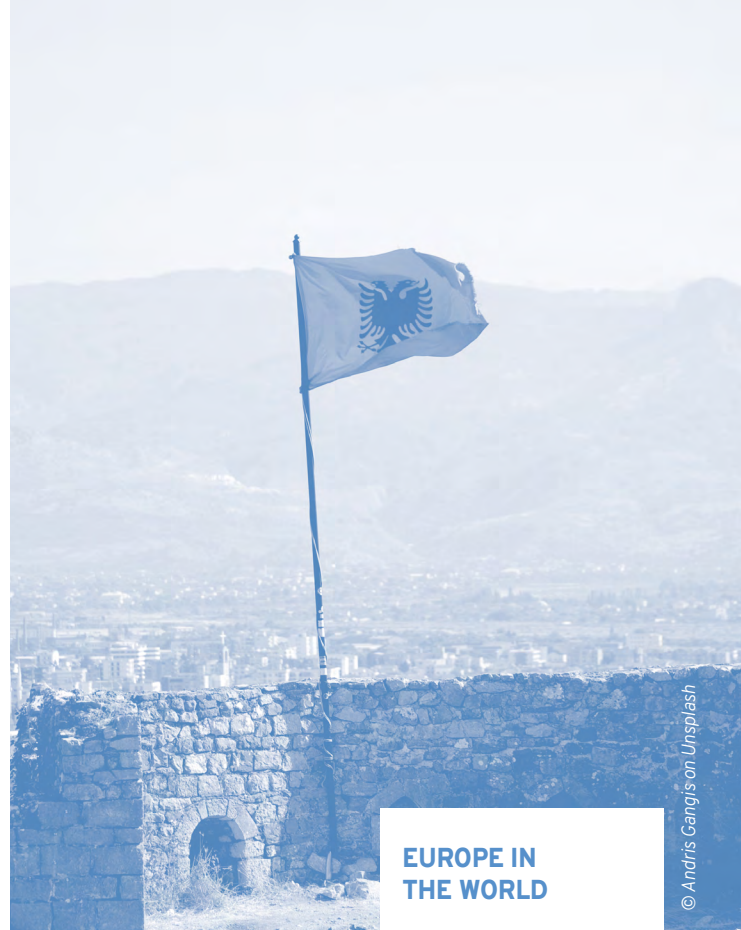


Abania's steep road for accession by 2030



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EUROPE IN
THE WORLD

POLICY BRIEF
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#enlargement
#balkan
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Having just opened the first cluster in the negotiations for accession to the European Union in October 2024, Albania's ambition is to join in 2030. This tight agenda, tacitly encouraged by the European Commission, challenges this Euro-Atlanticist country detached from Balkanic disputes to modernise its economy and reform its governance, struggling with corruption, to retain its vital forces.



Sébastien Maillard,
Special Adviser at
the Institut Jacques
Delors (Centre
Grande Europe)

I • An undisputed Western orientation

Albania identifies itself as Europe, in the most Western sense. Since the end of the Stalinist and, for a time, Maoist dictatorship of Enver Hodja (1908-1985) and the democratisation of the regime from 1990 onwards, it has looked entirely to the West. A member of the Council of Europe since 1995 and of NATO since 2009, the year it applied to join the European Union, Albania proudly puts forward its links with both Washington and Brussels, in the manner of the Baltic states that it often refers to as a benchmark. It keeps Russia and China at arm's length, particularly under pressure from the United States, which has made the country its rear base for intelligence in the region. At the same time, Tirana has fully aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy over the last several years (application of sanctions against the Kremlin). Its declared closeness to Turkey does not prevent it from refusing to extradite opponents of Erdogan. This **Euro-Atlantic allegiance makes it a reliable ally** in this period of geopolitical uncertainty. The "Land of Eagles" (*Shqipëri*) will host the next summit of the European Political Community, expected for June 2025. It is also positioning itself to host the NATO summit in 2027.

This Western anchorage is agreed throughout the entire society and political class. **No party questions the objective of joining the EU**, which is widely shared by the population. European appetite is reputed to be the highest in the region. According to the latest Eurobarometer, 87% of Albanians believe that their country's accession to the EU would be "a good thing"¹. This largely pro-EU stance, which is set to last², reassures the EU-27 that a future political changeover would not jeopardise EU membership. Unlike Serbia, which is ambivalent about its relationship with the EU, Albania has "no plan B", as its leaders keep pledging.

→ *Albania's solid Western position is much welcomed by the EU-27 but it also challenges the bloc to maintain its high standards for*

membership, as a benchmark to the rest of the Western Balkans.

II • A country detached from Balkanic disputes and turned towards Italy

Albania is seeking to "**debalkanise**" its **image**. Having broken away from neighbouring Yugoslavia under the dictatorship, the country's own history and identity do not want to be swallowed with the rest of the Western Balkans that broke up from the former Federation. In this respect, Tirana considers the recent **decoupling of its accession negotiations from those of North Macedonia** to be fully justified.

Its accession negotiations are more parallel to the ones of Montenegro. The possibility of both countries joining the EU roughly at the same time is considered, given the advanced stage Podgorica has reached in own its negotiations, also given the **territorial continuity** (see map page 1) that this enlargement would entail for the EU, and the **emulation effect** it would possibly have for the region, on Serbia in particular.

Albania, which has long been at loggerheads with Belgrade over its support for Kosovo's independence, is now **warming up its relations with Serbia**. In the lingering and prickly dispute between Belgrade and Pristina, Tirana is urging the Kosovan government to follow the recommendations of the EU and the United States. With Pristina today losing influence, **Albania cannot claim any mediation role** in a conflict where it would not be perceived as a neutral and therefore credible player. It keeps its distance. The country's elites also reject the fantasy of forming a "Greater Albania", a political pitch that has become inaudible in Tirana and out of public debate.

The absence of territorial and memory disputes with the countries of the former Yugoslavia make regional relations much easier. Closer relations have also been supported by the EU-27 for the past ten years

1 Standard Eurobarometer 101/Albania, spring 2024. N.B. This indicator stood at 95% in the previous survey in autumn 2023.

2 Debomy D. 2023. "Dans les têtes des Balkans", *Décryptage*, Paris: Institut Jacques Delors, June.

as part of the Berlin Process and its project for a regional market prefiguring the single market, in which Tirana is participating. It is proud to have hosted the EU-Western Balkans summit in December 2022. The new Growth Facility, which the Commission launched in November 2023 and which provides six billion euros in loans and grants over 2024-2027 to the whole of the Western Balkans, also supports this **regional economic integration** with a view to enlargement.

However, **Albania's foremost historical, trade and social partner remains Italy**. The neighbouring country is its main supplier and its main customer. Social relations are close, with an Albanian population established throughout Italy since the end of the dictatorship, and links are dense. Italians are also the most numerous foreign residents in Albania (3,375³), just after the Kosovars. This very special relationship has encouraged Rome to sponsor Albania's accession to the EU. It is also used to justify the opening, at the request and with funding from the Meloni government, of an Italian **asylum processing centre** on Albanian soil for the next five years. Such a facility, which is little debated in Albania, is presented by Tirana as exceptional and unique.

The country's relationship with Greece is also close but far more ambivalent. Each country has a sizeable minority in the other. This fuels claims, particularly over property, which are a source of political tension⁴. Their recurrence will leave **Athens' attitude towards Albanian membership uncertain** until the very end.

→ *The objective of joining the EU is pushing Albania, which sees itself as the bridgehead of the Western Balkans, to develop its regional integration in South-East Europe, while maintaining a certain distance from the countries of the former Yugoslavia and cultivating its very close links with Italy.*

3 Source INSTAT, 23 August 2024

4 The Greek government repeatedly threatened to block the opening of accession negotiations with Albania after Tirana arrested Fredis Beleri, an opposition mayor of Greek origin, in 2023 on charges of vote-buying in Albanian municipal elections. Elected as a Member of the European Parliament (EPP) for Greece in June 2024, he was subsequently released after 16 months in detention. At the European Parliament, he sits on the delegation monitoring Albania's preparations for EU membership.

5 According to data from the Albanian Federation of Medicine in 2022, around 3,000 doctors have left the country over the last ten years.

6 Source INSTAT, Albania's statistics agency

III • A cohesive society losing its youth

Albania stands out from other Western Balkan countries also for its social cohesion. An old nation-state, the country is home to a largely homogenous population, which does not preclude a well-accepted religious plurality. Officially atheist under the dictatorship, Albania's Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox and Bektashi (Sufi) faiths coexist harmoniously, as Pope Francis emphasised when he visited in 2014. Sunni Islam, which is moderate and barely in the majority, is observed without ostentation, in a mix of tolerance and indifference.

The main concern is the emigration of the country's traditionally large youth population (the average age was 26 in 1984). The 2023 census records a 14% fall in the population in twelve years (-430,000 inhabitants) and a quarter since the end of the dictatorship. Enrolment in both schools and universities is falling. This trend, which dates back to the early 1990s and keeps on-going, signals a loss of confidence in the country's future and in its governance. In order to stem the number of people leaving the health sector⁵, a law passed in 2024 now requires medical students to practise in the country for three years after completing their training or pay it back otherwise. In addition to the most highly qualified young people, Albanian society is also losing its core human forces. Emigration outside the country goes along with inner movements towards Tirana, where a third of the population is now concentrated, hindering balanced regional development, affecting the north in particular.

Emigration is strengthening a diaspora that is mainly split between Italy, Greece and Germany. In short, **Albanians joined the EU before Albania does**. The diaspora, estimated to total 1.7 million people in 2020 (equivalent to 59% of the resident population⁶), is also very present in the United States. This strong

presence abroad provides support through its abundant remittances (representing 9% of GDP in 2022) to pensioners whose pensions are still largely insufficient to live on.

→ *EU membership offers the country the prospect of achieving European standards of living in the hope of retaining its young people. The credibility of the process will not be enough to halt a trend towards emigration, observed in many Eastern European countries and fueled by the need for labour elsewhere.*

IV • Stable, personalised leadership, lacking opposition

Edi Rama is more than ever the strong man of Albania. In power since 2014, **the prime minister is preparing to serve a fourth four-year term** after parliamentary elections expected for early May 2025. These are unlikely to challenge the **dominance of his socialist party**, which currently holds a narrow absolute majority (74 seats out of the 140 in the Assembly). Since the local elections in May 2023, the party now also holds most of the municipalities, including the historic right-wing stronghold of Shköder (north).

Although it is vehemently opposed to the government, repeatedly demonstrating noisily, through “civil disobedience” actions, **opposition remains weak**. The two main opposition parties, the Democratic Party (PD, centre-right) and the Freedom Party (PL, ex-LSI, sovereigntist left), are at present widely considered to be too divided to be capable of presenting a convincing alternative. Sali Berisha, founder and former leader of the PD, President of the Republic in the 1990s and Edi Rama’s predecessor as head of government from 2005 to 2013, has been under house arrest since the end of 2023 following allegations of corruption benefiting his family when he was head of government, which he denies⁷ (see also point 5 below). Political life remains sterilely polarised. In its latest report on the country’s preparations⁸,

the European Commission reckons this lack of constructive dialogue between the government and the opposition, although it considers that parliament is functioning normally. The report also highlights the limited role given to civil society, including about European membership.

Indeed, Edi Rama’s longevity as head of government (three consecutive terms since 2013) and his widely recognised charisma favour his **personal exercise of power**, which the opposition readily denounces as authoritarian. From the point of view of Western chancelleries, his personalization of power is accepted and not considered comparable to the extent of illiberal excesses witnessed in Serbia or Hungary. Standing as the international face of Albania (the Head of State constitutionally holds no power), with his imposing stature, the current Prime Minister maintains direct personal relations with a number of major European leaders, who appreciate a respected interlocutor. In the country, his popularity is still considered comfortable after eleven years in power, with 46% of positive opinions, far ahead of his main opponent, Sali Berisha, who aged 80 is credited with 28%.⁹

Edi Rama is regarded as keen to ensure his country’s accession to the EU, which he ambitions to complete at the end of his last term in office. He is expected to **use all his political capital** to this end. Successful accession of Albania to the EU now represents a personal matter.

→ *From an enlargement perspective, Albania’s political stability helps providing the impetus needed for the reforms to be undertaken. But it also carries the risk of distancing the country from the democratic standards required for accession.*

7 Sali Berisha was banned from entering the United States by the State Department in May 2021 and then banned from entering the UK in July 2022, on accusations of links with organised crime. The British courts upheld the ban in June 2024 (sources: Reuters, Euronews).

8 European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report*, Communication of 30 October 2024

9 Datacentrum Euronews Barometer Albania survey, 16 October 2024

V • Fighting corruption

Corruption remains a scourge in Albania. It is considered to be declining in everyday life, but still pervasive in the economic and political spheres, which are in dangerous collusion. The long-term trend remains uncertain. A recent study supported by the EU shows that the proportion of the adult population admitting to having bribed or been bribed by public officials has remained at the high level of 40% in 2023 as in 2014, with fluctuations over the period¹⁰. The population is currently the most exposed to corruption in the Western Balkans, according to the same study¹¹. Transparency International's corruption perception index for 2023 places the country 98th out of 180, slightly ahead of Serbia and Ukraine (ranked the same at 104^e). Corruption weighs heavily on the business climate.¹²

Albania remains particularly vulnerable to **drug trafficking**. The country is one of the main producers of cannabis in South-East Europe and is involved in cocaine trafficking¹³. This activity encourages the growth of **organised crime**, with European ramifications, and money laundering, particularly in real estate. The European Commission is concerned about legalising the cultivation of cannabis for medical and industrial purposes.

The most decried method of corruption is through **tailor-made laws**. For example, a 2015 law on so-called strategic investments, which offers tax breaks and simplified administrative procedures for this purpose, gives the government the option of handing over land. According to the EU, this has made it possible to legally grant advantageous real estate concessions to Albanian investors, the main beneficiaries of this law recently extended.

The new **land registry**, due to open in 2023, has been a tedious process to set up in a country where the dictatorship eradicated all

private property. The process of restitution and compensation for formerly nationalised land, the issuing of land titles and expropriation procedures are giving rise to constant disputes, which cause embezzlement. The Commission is concerned that the classification of land (agricultural or for construction) is a source of abuse. Albanians hope that EU accession will discipline the country against those types of abuse.¹⁴

To ensure that corruption and organised crime no longer go unpunished, a wide-ranging reform of the justice system was adopted in 2016. It saw the creation in 2019 of a **special anti-corruption prosecutor's office**, known by its acronym Spak (*Struktura e Posaçme anti-korrupsion*). Its investigations are now feared throughout the country. Some spectacular arrests have been made, most recently that of the former President of the Republic and Prime Minister, Ilir Meta, leader of the PL (opposition), on 21 October 2024, on an arrest warrant issued by this special prosecutor's office. Former members of Edi Rama's government (interior, environment, health) have also been arrested. At the same time, however, an amnesty law passed in April 2024 allowed 40 people indicted by Spak to escape prosecution, as the European Commission deplors.¹⁵

The reform has a broader impact on the judicial system. Since 2017, a thorough **vetting process** of magistrates has led to the dismissal or resignation of 60% of judges and prosecutors, albeit for various reasons¹⁶. This clean-up of the judiciary is leading to significant **vacancies** and, with them, **excessive length of civil and criminal proceedings**.

The fight against corruption also has a preventive aspect, the effects of which are by definition less immediate. The government is counting on the **digitisation of administrative procedures** to limit the opportunities for bribes. **Increasing pay in the public sector** (13.8% of employment) to an average of

10 SELDI Report, 1 October 2024, *Breaking the anticorruption deadlock in the Western Balkans*, p.11

11 *Op.cit.* p.12

12 Rated C by Coface

13 UN 2024 annual report on drugs

14 Common Position of the EU to the Albanian Accession Conference, 11 October 2024, p.10

15 *Albania 2024 Commission Report, op.cit.* p.32

16 *Transparency International report on the fight against corruption in the Western Balkans*, 2024, p. 26

€900 by 2024 is also intended to reduce corruption. In addition, judges are being made more professional through **renewed training**¹⁷. Lastly, a post of **Minister of State responsible for combating corruption** in the administration was created in January 2024.

While acknowledging these repressive and preventive efforts, the Commission considers that their **effects are limited in the most exposed sectors**, and that corruption is still prevalent in public and business life in Albania¹⁸. In addition, the NGO Transparency¹⁹ points the finger at the complacency of the media and their concentration in the hands of influential families. On the other hand, progress has been made in the fight against money laundering: in October 2023, Albania was removed from the Gafi grey list.²⁰

→ *The eradication of corruption and the reliability of the judicial system are key to guaranteeing legal certainty, which is essential to Albania's European integration and the country's attractiveness for investments.*

VI • An economy in need of levelling-up

Agriculture accounts for almost 21% of GDP. Albania is a country of small farms. They account for 34% of all registered jobs. Their very modest size (1/10^e of the European average in size) is a factor in the country's **low labour productivity** (at 34.7% of the European average), considered to be the lowest in the Western Balkans²¹. In view of enlargement, the sector has enormous modernisation investment needs to meet European standards and face up to future competition from the single market. The EU is by far Albania's leading trading partner in goods.

For the time being, the country is delighted with **the surge in tourism**. Contributing 20% of GDP, including indirectly, tourism is partly

driving the country's growth, expected to reach 3.3% in 2024 according to the latest World Bank's forecast. But the sector raises issues of seasonality, sustainability in terms of environmental protection and competitiveness. Moreover, as in agriculture, it lends itself to the widespread **informal employment** in the country (the ILO estimates that it accounts for 60% of total employment).

Albania is a small, open economy that is sensitive to external shocks. The country has a number of assets that will help it secure its future and facilitate its integration into the EU. Almost 100% of its electricity, generated by hydroelectric dams, comes from renewable sources. But since hydroelectricity is by definition subject to the variety of rainfall, the country is banking on its **solar potential**. With the support of the EBRD, a large-scale photovoltaic plant has started production in the south.

The country is also rich in mineral resources. It has traditionally been a major exporter of **chromium**, of which it has considerable reserves. Albania has other critical metals, and a survey is currently underway to assess their potential. A "regional innovation centre" dedicated to **raw materials** opened in 2024 south of Tirana, with the support of the EU, to help the country assess its strategic advantage in rare earths. Along with energy, extractive industries are the other sector to attract foreign direct investments. The challenge for Albania will be **to position itself in the value chain beyond extraction** alone. Integration into the European single market could facilitate this.

Yet in order to develop across all sectors, the country suffers from **rusty infrastructures**. The road network is in poor condition in rural areas. The rail link between Tirana and the port city of Durrës is under construction after having been closed. Of all the former Eastern Bloc countries, Albania was the most cut off from the rest of the continent. Moreover, the high level of unemployment

¹⁷ The Albanian School of Magistrates cooperates with the ENM in Bordeaux (France) on training.

¹⁸ EU Common Position, op.cit. p. 7 and *Albania 2024* Report from the Commission, op.cit.

¹⁹ TI Report, *Op.cit.*, p.58

²⁰ FATF Communiqué of 27 October 2023 on jurisdictions under enhanced monitoring. Bulgaria and Croatia are currently on this grey list.

²¹ DG Trésor (France), *Lettre des Balkans occidentaux, Les marchés du travail dans les BO*, June 2024

among 15-29 year-olds, at 22%, despite emigration, betrays the **inadequacy of training to meet the needs of businesses**, almost all of which are SMEs in Albania.

→ *Preparing for European membership means bringing an economy that is still too informal up to standard and focusing more on its strategic sectors.*

VII • A highly ambitious EU accession agenda

Albania has set itself the goal of **joining the EU by 2030**. The deadline serves to mobilise the country. It was not openly endorsed by President von der Leyen during her visit to Tirana on 23 October 2024, but the Commission is backing a very tight negotiating schedule. Following the opening of the first cluster of five chapters on 15 October²², a second cluster should be opened in mid-December. All 35 chapters should be open by the end of 2025. The aim is to complete the entire exercise (closing all 35 chapters) by the end of 2027, to allow time for unanimous ratification of the Accession Treaty by each of the 27 Member States.

Keeping to this timetable is a challenge, but it allows Edi Rama to build momentum and create the conditions that will force the administration, public services and businesses to speed up. The government believes that it has sufficient **administrative capacity** not only to transpose the extensive *acquis communautaire* but also to ensure that it is effectively implemented. A 35-strong team is working on integration at the Prime Minister's Office, with 23 contact officials across the ministries, drawing on a total of 1,812 support staff, according to government figures. However, the European Commission considers that Tirana will need to strengthen its expertise and planning in order to meet the negotiation timetable and boost what is reported as a **generally moderate level of preparation for accession**.

One of the hardest chapters to tackle will be on environment. This relates for instance to bringing wastewater treatment up to standard. The government is already planning to negotiate a **transition period** of ten years after accession to comply with EU requirements in this area. The environment chapter is all the more difficult because European legislation itself is evolving at the same time as the negotiations. Albania, like the other candidate countries, must adhere to the European objective of carbon neutrality by 2050 and its intermediate target of a 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2040 compared to 1990 levels.

Conversely, the chapter on the resumption of the Common Foreign and Security Policy is seen as one of the quickest to complete. Albania is already 100% aligned in this area.

To both secure its future membership and anticipate it institutionally, the Albanian government is proposing that it be granted the **status of Associated State**²³. For its political value, it wants to be granted this status, which is unprecedented in European law, from 2027, by prior agreement between the Commission, the Council of the EU and the European Parliament.

In practice, as elsewhere, the accession process is already taking shape in the form of gradual integration with concrete achievements. Like other Balkan countries, Albanian nationals enjoy **visa-free** travel to the EU. This system has been in force in Albania since November 2010. Since 2014, the country has been participating in the **Erasmus+ programme**. In addition, thanks in particular to its banking system, considered to be reliable, Albania is set to join the **Single Euro Payments Area (SEPA)** next year, following Montenegro, due to join on 1st January. This will facilitate transactions linked to tourism, the diaspora and foreign investment. In mobile telephony, *roaming* charges between the European Economic Area and the Western Balkans are set to fall. Finally, as part of the new European regional growth plan (see point 2 above), more than €922 million has

²² Chapter 23 “Judiciary and Fundamental Rights”, Chapter 24 “Justice, Freedom and Security”, Chapter 32 “Financial Control”, Chapter 5 “Public Procurement”, Chapter 18 “Statistics”.

²³ White Paper *Albania's Path to EU Accession*, September 2024; See also Maillard, S. “Pour un statut d'État associé”, *Policy Paper N°305*, Institut Jacques Delors, October 2024.

been earmarked for Albania over the period 2024-2027, strictly conditional on the effective implementation of accession reforms facilitating integration into the Single Market while respecting the rule of law.

→ *Since the opening of the first cluster in the accession negotiations, Albania is now dwelling in the core of the enlargement process. In order to meet the objective of concluding negotiations with the EU by the end of 2027, Albania will need to adopt the acquis without any delay, implement reforms deeply, maintain the political will of all parties and avoid any tension with any of the 27 Member States.*

Whatever the actual date, Albania's accession to the European Union would, from a historical perspective, represent a leap forward for a country that has suffered so much hardships in the past. It would be a source of pride for the often-despised Albanian diaspora. For the EU, it would give credibility to the enlargement process towards the rest of the Western Balkan countries, especially Serbia, where Russia and China are trying to assert their geopolitical clout.

I LIST OF PEOPLE MET IN TIRANA

Ometa Barbullushi, Resident Professor at the Tirana campus of the College of Europe

Zsuzsanna Beszteri, Hungarian expert seconded to the Office of the Prime Minister of Albania

Silvio Gonzato, Ambassador, Head of the EU Delegation to Albania

Adrian Kamenica, Director of the Department for European Integration, Office of the Prime Minister

Ardian Hackaj, Director of Research at the Coordination & Development Institute

Akil Kraja, Chief of Staff, Democratic Party (opposition)

Remzi Lani, Executive Director of the Albanian Media Institute

Catherine Suard, Ambassador of France to Albania

Jorida Tabaku, Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on European Integration (opposition MP)

Isabelle Thomas, French expert seconded to the Office of the Prime Minister of Albania

I CHRONOLOGY OF EU-ALBANIA RELATIONS

April 2009	Entry into force of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement and application for EU membership
December 2010	Visa liberalisation for entry into the Schengen area
June 2014	Candidate country status recognised by the European Council
April 2018	Commission recommends opening negotiations
15th October 2019	French, Dutch, Danish and Spanish veto the opening of negotiations with Albania
March 2020	The European Council decides to open negotiations
19th July 2022	Official opening of accession negotiations
24th November 2023	Screening of the EU <i>acquis</i> completed
15th October 2024	Opening of the fundamental chapters group (cluster 1)

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Penser l'Europe • Thinking Europe • Europa Denken

18 rue de Londres 75009 Paris, France • www.delorsinstitute.eu

T +33 (0)1 44 58 97 97 • info@delorsinstitute.eu



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