

ADVANCING THE REPUBLIC OF ALBANIA TOWARD EU ACCESSION THROUGH FUNDAMENTALS: PROGRESS ON OPENING BENCHMARKS IN RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Abstract

This article examines Albania's progress in meeting the opening benchmarks of Cluster I "Fundamentals" following the submission of its Negotiating Position to the European Commission on 2 October 2024. Anchored in the revised enlargement methodology, the article focuses on the effectiveness of reform implementation in the core areas of the Rule of Law, Human Rights, Public Administration Reform, and the Functioning of Democratic Institutions. By evaluating 'roadmap-based monitoring' approach, the article explores how Albania's strategic choices and commitments translate into measurable progress. In doing so, it offers insights into the transformative potential of EU conditionality and the credibility of Albania's integration trajectory.

Keywords: EU accession, Opening Benchmarks, Rule of Law, Human Rights, Public Administration Reform, Democratic Institutions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The initiation of EU accession negotiations represents a critical juncture in Albania's European integration process, particularly under the revised enlargement methodology introduced by the European Commission in 2020 (European Commission, 2020). This methodology strengthens the focus on fundamental reforms—specifically those related to the human rights, rule of law, democratic institutions, public administration, and fundamental rights—as essential preconditions for further progress in the accession process. These areas are grouped within Cluster I “Fundamentals,” which serves as the foundation of the accession negotiations (Blockmans & Vidović, 2021).

Opening benchmarks within this cluster are not merely technical indicators but strategic mechanisms designed to ensure the irreversibility of reforms, enhance transparency, and increase political accountability in candidate countries (Kochenov & Dimitrovs, 2020). In the case of the Republic of Albania, the submission of the Negotiating Position for Cluster I ‘Fundamentals’ on 2 October 2024 was preceded by the adoption of key strategic documents such as the Rule of Law Roadmap, the Public Administration Reform Roadmap, and the Functioning of Democratic Institutions Roadmap. These instruments aim to operationalize the EU's political criteria in national policy and institutional frameworks (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2024).

The effectiveness of these Opening Benchmarks lies in their ability to guide structural reforms and promote institutional convergence with EU standards (Sedelmeier, 2014). Moreover, they serve as a litmus test for the political commitment of the candidate country to uphold EU values and ensure compliance with the Copenhagen criteria (Grabbe, 2006). This article aims to assess the impact of these benchmarks in Albania's case, with a specific focus on the progress achieved in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democratic institutions. Through a critical analysis of institutional coordination, legal reform instruments, and initial implementation outcomes, the article seeks to offer insights into the transformative potential of the EU's conditionality framework.

2. STRATEGIC READINESS AND AIM OF THE OPENING BENCHMARKS MECHANISM (OBM)

One of the core purposes of the Opening Benchmarks mechanism, as established under the revised EU enlargement methodology, is to assess the strategic readiness and responsiveness of candidate countries to undertake transformative reforms aligned with the Union's foundational values. The Opening Benchmarks, as outlined in the context of Albania's accession negotiations, are designed not merely as procedural milestones but as strategic tools to guide and measure the country's progress in meeting the EU's fundamental criteria—particularly in the areas of rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance (European Commission, 2020).

These benchmarks are inherently dynamic, evolving in tandem with Albania's alignment trajectory and its institutional capacity to internalize and operationalize EU norms. Evaluating their effectiveness requires an assessment of their dual role: first, in driving structural reform, and second, in testing the political will and institutional coherence necessary for their enforcement. The formal adoption of strategic instruments such as the Rule of Law Roadmap and the Public Administration Reform Roadmap (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2024) demonstrates Albania's intent to fulfill these obligations. Yet, the critical phase lies in implementation—where the consistency of inter-institutional coordination and the credibility of monitoring mechanisms become central to ensuring reform sustainability.

Recent scholarly assessments emphasize the transformation in the EU's approach towards enlargement, highlighting an increased politicization of conditionality that goes beyond technical compliance to scrutinize substantive reforms, particularly in the rule of law (Kochenov, 2019; Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005). This shift has heightened the importance of the Opening Benchmarks as instruments of political accountability and as early indicators of candidate countries' capacity to uphold democratic principles (European Commission, 2018). Moreover, comparisons with experiences from existing Member States reveal that the depth and credibility of reforms, especially judicial independence and anti-corruption measures, significantly influence accession trajectories (Grabbe, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2014). Therefore, it is essential to situate Albania's benchmark progress within

this broader EU framework, acknowledging that these benchmarks do not merely represent formal requirements but embody a strategic recalibration of enlargement policy aimed at safeguarding the Union's institutional integrity. In this context, monitoring mechanisms must be robust and adaptive, reflecting lessons learned from past enlargements where superficial compliance failed to guarantee sustainable reform (European Commission, 2020). Ultimately, the Opening Benchmarks serve as both a catalyst and a compass for Albania's EU integration journey, reinforcing accountability while shaping a governance culture that aligns with the EU *acquis* and democratic standards.

3. OPENING OF NEGOCIATION FOR CLUSTER I 'FUNDAMENTAL'

3.1. Shifting Conditionality and the Role of the Rule of Law: The 2018 EU Enlargement Strategy

The 2018 EU Enlargement Strategy, officially titled *A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans*, marked a strategic shift in the European Union's enlargement policy (European Commission, 2018). While reaffirming the EU's commitment to future enlargement, it placed unprecedented emphasis on strengthening the rule of law, fighting corruption, and ensuring the independence of the judiciary. This approach reflects a broader evolution in EU conditionality, where accession is no longer measured solely by technical compliance with the *acquis*, but increasingly by the depth and credibility of structural reforms. As noted by Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005), conditionality functions as a mechanism of "external governance" that promotes Europeanization through the incentive of membership. However, in more recent years, the EU has acknowledged the limits of formal compliance and has begun to emphasize the substance of reforms, particularly in areas such as justice, media freedom, and institutional integrity (Grabbe, 2006; Sedelmeier, 2014). The 2018 Strategy introduced "flagship initiatives" — reform priorities that serve as reference points for monitoring progress in the Western Balkans. These include judicial reform, public administration modernization, economic development, and reconciliation (European Commission, 2018). Importantly, the EU also highlighted that enlargement would follow a "merit-based and reversible" approach, making it clear that progress can be paused or reversed in the event of backsliding, especially

in the rule of law (European Commission, 2020). In Albania's case, this translates into increased scrutiny over initiatives such as the judicial vetting process, the establishment and functioning of justice independent institutions, and the operationalization of anti-corruption frameworks. These efforts are assessed not just in procedural terms, but in light of their credibility, sustainability, and impact—criteria at the heart of modern conditionality (Kochenov, 2019). This shift signals that benchmarks—once mainly technical—have become instruments of political conditionality, reflecting broader concerns over democratic backsliding and the resilience of institutions in candidate countries.

3.2. Strategic preparation and milestones for Cluster I 'Fundamentals'

The process of opening negotiations for Albania's accession to the European Union (EU) under Chapter I, entitled "Fundamentals," was initiated after the completion of the analytical screening process of the EU Acquis with the European Commission. Based on a letter from the Spanish Presidency dated November 30, 2023, Albania took significant steps towards preparing for the formal start of negotiations. Albania developed two pivotal opening benchmarks under this chapter, which were essential for the negotiation process: the "Rule of Law" and the "Public Administration Reform" roadmaps. These two roadmaps were formally approved by the Albanian Council of Ministers in December 2023, through Decision No. 736, which authorized the "Rule of Law Roadmap," and Decision No. 737, which approved the "Public Administration Reform Roadmap for 2023-2030." Both of these strategic documents were officially submitted to the EU on December 13, 2023 (Council of Ministers, 2023).

These documents set out the fundamental measures Albania had committed to implementing in line with EU standards and outlined the planned reforms across various key sectors. The "Rule of Law" Roadmap is part of Albania's broader commitment to upholding the rule of law, while the "Public Administration Reform" roadmap aligns with the EU's demands for modern, transparent, and accountable administrative systems (Council of Ministers, 2023). In addition to these benchmarks, Albania also developed a third roadmap, titled the "Functioning of Democratic Institutions" Roadmap, as part of its alignment with the EU enlargement methodology. Although this roadmap was not a precondition for the negotiations, it was required as part of the broader alignment with EU standards. This

document was approved by the Albanian government with Decision No. 611 on October 2, 2024 (Council of Ministers, 2024). The roadmap set out clear goals for improving democratic processes and institutions in Albania, in accordance with EU expectations for democratic governance. The submission of Albania's Negotiating Position for Chapter I "Fundamentals" was preceded by significant deliberations. Following a letter from the Hungarian Presidency on September 25, 2024, requesting the submission of the Negotiating Position, Albania's Negotiating Group thoroughly reviewed and approved the final draft of the Negotiating Position on September 26, 2024 (European Commission, 2024). This document formed the basis of Albania's commitments and the roadmap for future negotiations under Chapter I. In accordance with Albanian law, specifically Law No. 15/2015 "On the Role of the Assembly in the Integration Process of the Republic of Albania into the European Union," as amended by Law No. 19/2023, the Minister of State and Chief Negotiator presented the proposed Negotiating Position for Chapter I to the Committee on European Affairs of the Albanian Parliament. The Committee convened on September 30, 2024, to review the draft, and it made several key recommendations for refining the final document. These suggestions were incorporated into the draft by the Negotiating Group, demonstrating a collaborative approach to the negotiation process (Assembly of the Republic of Albania, 2023). Subsequently, on October 2, 2024, the State Committee for European Integration reviewed the Negotiating Position again. The meeting involved the presentation of the proposed document, which had been updated to reflect the feedback from the Committee on European Affairs. After incorporating these recommendations, the position was sent for approval to the Council of Ministers, which subsequently authorized it under Decision No. 614 on October 2, 2024 (Council of Ministers, 2024). The approved Negotiating Position was officially forwarded to the European Commission services through the Mission of the Republic of Albania to the EU.

The Negotiating Position for Chapter I "Fundamentals" comprehensively addresses the commitments Albania has made under the roadmaps and outlines the necessary reforms for aligning with EU standards. Key areas of focus include the functioning of democratic institutions, public administration reform, the judiciary, and fundamental rights. Notably, Albania has committed to modernizing its electoral system by introducing biometric voter identification and electronic voting systems to enhance transparency and accuracy in

elections. Efforts also focus on improving gender representation and depoliticizing election commissions, alongside facilitating greater participation of the Albanian diaspora in the electoral process. In the domain of public administration, Albania has outlined plans to fully implement the National Strategy for Development and European Integration (NSDIE 2022-2030), ensuring good governance and transparency in human resource management. These reforms aim to improve recruitment processes within the civil service, making them more transparent and merit-based, while also emphasizing continuous training for civil servants to enhance their capacities. Furthermore, the Republic of Albania is committed to reforms in its judiciary and fundamental rights. This includes bolstering the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, ensuring the quality and efficiency of court procedures, and enhancing anti-corruption strategies through improved international cooperation and strengthened legal frameworks for preventing and prosecuting corruption. Albania has also committed to strengthening its justice, freedom, and security frameworks, including increased cooperation with EU agencies such as Europol and Frontex, and addressing organized crime and human trafficking. The country has also focused on economic criteria, striving to enhance economic stability, improve competitiveness, and foster a better business climate through streamlined legal and regulatory processes. Additionally, Albania's public procurement processes will be enhanced through digitalization and the application of modern technologies such as artificial intelligence to reduce corruption risks. Improvements in statistical methodologies and financial control mechanisms are also part of Albania's broader reform efforts, ensuring greater accountability and transparency in public spending. The comprehensive approach outlined in Albania's Negotiating Position underscores the country's commitment to meeting EU standards in key areas, with a clear timeline aiming for full alignment by 2030 (European Commission, 2024). No transitional periods or derogations are requested in the negotiation process for these chapters, reflecting Albania's determination to fully integrate into the EU's regulatory and legal frameworks. On October 15, 2024, the Second Intergovernmental Conference was held, marking the formal opening of negotiations for Chapter I "Fundamentals." This event represented a significant milestone in Albania's EU integration journey (European Union, 2024). The European Commission subsequently issued the EU Common Position document, which outlines the intermediate benchmarks for Chapter I and sets specific benchmarks for Chapters 23 "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights" and 24

"Justice, Freedom, and Security." The document also defines the closing benchmarks for Chapters 5 "Public Procurement," 18 "Statistics," and 32 "Financial Control." These benchmarks will guide further negotiations and ensure that all criteria are met before the closing of these chapters (European Commission, 2024). This step marks a crucial point in Albania's European integration process, highlighting the progress made and the continued commitment to fulfilling the necessary reforms. The opening of negotiations for Chapter I "Fundamentals" sets the stage for deeper engagement with the EU and strengthens Albania's position on the path to full EU membership.

4. PROGRESS ON THE REFORMS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

4.1. The Transformation of EU Conditionality and Benchmarking: Implications for Albania's Reform Process

The evolution of the European Union's enlargement policy over the past two decades reflects a shift from technical compliance to a more politicized and values-based approach. In its early phases, enlargement focused heavily on alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, measured through progress in meeting Copenhagen Criteria and the successful adoption of EU legislation. However, experiences from previous enlargement rounds — particularly with Central and Eastern European countries — revealed that formal alignment did not always ensure deep, lasting reforms (Grabbe, 2006).

The EU's growing concern with democratic backsliding in some new Member States prompted a re-evaluation of conditionality mechanisms. As Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier (2005) note, pre-accession conditionality functions best when the EU maintains credibility and consistency in both incentives and enforcement. The revised enlargement methodology of 2020 introduced clearer political steering, more transparent benchmarks, and an explicit emphasis on the reversibility of the process (European Commission, 2020). One of the most significant conceptual shifts was introduced with the 2018 Enlargement Strategy, which reframed enlargement as a geopolitical necessity tied to regional stability, but also highlighted that rule of law, justice reform, and good governance are no longer negotiable political conditions — they are foundational principles (European Commission, 2018). This repositioning has had direct consequences on how candidate countries, such as Albania, are

evaluated. Albania's EU integration process now operates within this renewed framework of substantive conditionality, where not only legal alignment, but also institutional performance and integrity are central to progress. Mechanisms such as benchmark-based reporting, flagship reforms, and progress reversibility illustrate how the EU has learned from past challenges and is now attempting to enforce more credible accession pathways (Kochenov, 2019). This evolution reflects a dual intention: to protect the EU's internal cohesion by ensuring that new members share core democratic values, and to strengthen transformative power in candidate states through credible and strategic engagement. Comparing Albania's accession process with the path taken by current Member States illustrates the increasing stringency of these conditions. For example, countries like Romania and Bulgaria faced rigorous benchmarks related to judicial reform and anti-corruption mechanisms, which were subject to post-accession monitoring under the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM). However, in recent years, the EU has recognized that these measures sometimes lacked sufficient enforcement power and have since refined conditionality mechanisms, embedding political benchmarks earlier in accession talks and linking progress to tangible institutional changes (European Commission, 2020). In Albania's case, the Opening Benchmarks under Chapter I "Fundamentals" reflect this evolved approach by serving both as strategic tools to guide reforms and as tests of the country's political will and institutional capacity. The benchmarks now encompass not only procedural reforms—such as adopting legal frameworks—but also the practical implementation, sustainability, and credibility of these reforms. This represents a notable shift from earlier enlargement rounds, where the focus was more on the existence of laws rather than their effective enforcement. Activities such as the Rule of Law Roadmap and the Public Administration Reform Roadmap demonstrate Albania's alignment with these enhanced conditionality standards. Yet, consistent with lessons learned from previous accessions, the emphasis is on credible monitoring and inter-institutional coordination to avoid superficial compliance. This shift recognizes that rule of law reforms are inherently political and require durable institutional changes supported by broad societal consensus. Therefore, reevaluating Albania's reform activities within this updated conditionality framework is essential. It highlights that benchmarks are no longer static checklists but dynamic instruments reflecting political realities and institutional integrity. This nuanced understanding aligns Albania's accession

path with the EU's broader goal of safeguarding the Union's democratic values and preventing challenges faced by earlier Member States after their accession.

4.2. Progress in Key Reforms and Human Rights towards Meeting EU Opening Benchmarks

On October 30, 2024, the European Commission published its 2024 Albania Progress Report. This came after the completion of the first screening process for the six negotiation chapters by November 24, 2023, and following the First Intergovernmental Conference on Accession Negotiations held on July 19, 2022. In the context of the ongoing accession negotiations, Albania presented three key roadmaps which are instrumental in guiding its reform efforts in the integration process (European Commission, 2024). These roadmaps were designed to align with the broader European Union framework, while also reinforcing Albania's commitment to fulfilling the criteria necessary for membership. Furthermore, Albania has remained actively engaged in implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), with consistent interactions in the joint bodies set up under this agreement, which convened regularly throughout the past year (European Commission, 2024).

4.2.1 Advancing based on the EU Progress Report Recommendations

The Second Intergovernmental Conference, held in October 2024, marked the formal opening of negotiations for Chapter I "Fundamentals," a significant milestone in the country's EU accession journey (Council of the European Union, 2024). Albania has repeatedly underscored that EU integration remains its highest political priority, and the country has demonstrated sustained ambition in driving forward the reform agenda in line with EU expectations. This ambition is manifest in the country's commitment to accelerating reforms, which is expected to be further facilitated by the ongoing negotiation process (European Commission, 2024). The Republic of Albania's alignment with the EU's common foreign and security policy has been another area of significant progress. In particular, Albania's active role as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council from 2022 to 2023 served as a demonstration of its full support for the EU's stance on critical

global issues (United Nations, 2023). The country co-sponsored resolutions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine, reflecting its commitment to the EU's foreign policy objectives. Albania's participation in EU sanctions and its positioning as a reliable EU partner is indicative of its strategic alignment with the Union (United Nations, 2023).

The country has also made significant strides in regional cooperation through the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, which emphasizes four key pillars: the integration of the region into the EU single market, fostering regional economic integration, implementing fundamental reforms, and securing increased financial support from the EU (European Commission, 2024). The reform agenda is comprehensive, addressing key areas such as the business environment, human capital, digitalization, energy and green transition, and fundamental rights, along with strengthening the rule of law. The European Commission's Rule of Law Report for 2024 includes Albania for the first time, further highlighting the country's alignment with EU norms (European Commission, 2024). In terms of specific progress, Albania has shown notable improvements across six negotiation chapters, with particularly positive developments in the areas of "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights," "Justice, Freedom, and Security," and "Economic Criteria." These chapters saw progress from previous assessments, moving to a higher level of preparation, which has been recognized in the EU's evaluation (European Commission, 2024). Albania has also made substantial progress in the areas of energy, foreign policy, and digital transformation, all of which are key components of the EU accession process (European Commission, 2024).

One of the standout achievements highlighted in the 2024 Progress Report was the completion of 798 vetting cases by the vetting institutions, marking a high completion rate of nearly 99%. Moreover, the Albanian State Police demonstrated enhanced international cooperation, increasing the use of the Secure Information Exchange Network Application (SIENA) by 32.2% compared to previous years (European Commission, 2024). This step was seen as vital in Albania's efforts to strengthen its security sector, in line with EU expectations (European Commission, 2024). The country has also made significant strides in its economic performance. Despite a challenging global economic environment, Albania achieved a growth rate of 3.4% in 2023, following strong performances in previous years. The country's tourism sector played a crucial role in this growth, with service exports, particularly in

tourism, driving much of the expansion (World Bank, 2023). This was accompanied by a continued reduction in Albania's trade deficit, a decrease in foreign debt, and a significant drop in the current account deficit, reaching the lowest historical level of 0.9% of GDP (World Bank, 2023).

These economic improvements reflect Albania's commitment to aligning its economic policies with EU standards (European Commission, 2024). In terms of fiscal management, Albania has demonstrated substantial progress. The fiscal deficit narrowed significantly, and public debt decreased to below 60% of GDP, representing a positive trend toward fiscal sustainability (International Monetary Fund, 2023). Government revenues also increased, with tax collections rising by 10.6% year-on-year (European Commission, 2024). Employment rates also saw an upward trajectory, reaching 67.2% in 2023, primarily driven by increased labor force participation (Eurostat, 2023). Further, Albania made significant progress in its efforts to enhance digital infrastructure. By Q3 of 2023, the number of broadband subscribers had risen by 7.6%, reflecting the country's efforts to improve digital connectivity (International Telecommunication Union, 2023). Online public services also expanded, with 95% of public services being made available online in the 2023–2024 period (European Commission, 2024). In the transportation sector, Albania continued its investments in infrastructure projects. Notably, the country focused on enhancing road and railway networks, improving regional connectivity, and facilitating trade (Albanian Ministry of Infrastructure, 2023). Investments in digital services also gained momentum, with broadband connectivity reaching 611,130 subscribers by the third quarter of 2023 (International Telecommunication Union, 2023). Overall, the 2024 Progress Report clearly reflects Albania's substantial and continued progress in its EU integration journey. The country has demonstrated commitment across various sectors, including the judiciary, security, economy, and infrastructure, and has made significant strides in aligning with EU policies and standards. These advancements represent both Albania's ambition and its capacity to meet the EU's rigorous accession criteria, signaling that Albania is on the right path toward eventual membership (European Commission, 2024).

4.2.1.1 Advancing based on the Opening Benchmarks Cluster I 'Fundamental'

The implementation of the key measures outlined in the three Roadmaps as triggers for the Opening benchmarks for 2024 is progressing as follows: "Rule of Law" Roadmap - Opening Benchmark. Pursuant to the Council of Ministers' Decision no. 736, dated 13 December 2023, regarding the adoption of the "Rule of Law" roadmap, the Ministry of Justice, acting as the lead institution (Negotiator) for Chapter 23 "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights," initiated the coordination and monitoring process for the implementation of the measures outlined in this roadmap (European Commission, 2024). Related to the judiciary the process for selecting members of the High Judicial Council (HJC) and the High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) from civil society has been successfully completed. Both Councils are now fully operational, with newly elected chairs and vice-chairs. Additionally, the transitional re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors was successfully concluded by the Independent Qualification Commission (KPK), which completed 805 cases out of 805, or 100% of the ex-officio list (European Commission, 2023).

On 18 December 2024, the Council of Ministers approved the Intersectoral Justice Strategy 2024-2030, along with its strategic documents. This strategy outlines key objectives and expected results over the next seven years for the justice system, in line with Albania's EU integration obligations (European Commission, 2023). The High Prosecutorial Council (HPC) appointed a magistrate as an internal instructor at the School of Magistrates in September 2024. Furthermore, the twinning project with the Dutch School of Magistrates (SSR) commenced work to assess and improve the mentoring program (EU Twinning, 2024). The School of Magistrates established a working group to develop a new curriculum on "Judicial Process Digitalization." This curriculum is being assisted by the Council of Europe, which has provided expertise on the issues it will address (Council of Europe, 2024). On 26 November 2024, the HPC approved the "Methodology for Ethical and Professional Evaluation of Prosecutors at the General Prosecutor's Office," which will be integrated into the Regulation on Ethical and Professional Evaluation. The HPC also approved seven ethical and professional evaluation reports, justified according to the format of judicial decisions (Council of Europe, 2024). In October 2024, the HJC appointed 32 judges who had been selected in July 2024. The Special Court of Appeals for Corruption and Organized Crime

became fully operational with ten judges assigned to their positions, out of eleven required. On 3 December 2024, the HJC issued Decision no. 700, appointing an inspector at the High Inspectorate of Justice.

Related to the Anti-Corruption the measures outlined in the 2024-2030 ‘Anti-Corruption Strategy’ (SNKK) have been consolidated, particularly in relation to integrity, transparency, and accountability. On 26 December 2024, the Council of Ministers approved the new SNKK, the 2024-2026 Action Plan, and a performance indicators passport (Council of Europe, 2024). A preventive wiretapping unit has been established within the Bureau of Anti-Corruption (BKH), and the establishment of two additional units is in progress. During 2024, BKH secured access to 19 databases from Albanian state institutions and signed four agreements with foreign law enforcement agencies (EUROPOL, INTERPOL, and SELEC) for information exchange and database access (European Commission, 2023). On 6 December 2024, the Director of BKH appointed a Deputy Director for the Bureau. The development of a methodology for assessing corruption risk in the public procurement sector is underway. In December 2024, a roundtable discussion on anti-corruption measures in public procurement was held, involving the DPAK and the Public Procurement Agency, in cooperation with ANAC (European Commission, 2024).

Related to the Fundamental Rights on 19 December 2024, the law “On the Protection of Personal Data” was approved, aligning it with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Police Directive (European Commission, 2023). A methodology for calculating the cost of care for orphaned children has been developed, and over 100 new professionals in Tirana and Shkodra have been trained. The Agency for the Protection of National Minorities (ASHK) worked with the Minister of State for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption to finalize and approve an Integrity Plan. On 14 October 2024, ASHK’s Director issued Order no. 1769 to establish a working group for drafting an integrity plan for the State Cadastre Agency for the 2025-2026 period. On 27 September 2024, Ministerial Order no. 513 established an inter-institutional working group to collect and process gender-disaggregated data for 2024. Regarding the legislation under Law no. 96/2017 “On the Protection of National Minorities in the Republic of Albania,” the Ministry of the Interior has worked on and sent for evaluation the three related draft decisions to the Commissioner for

Information and Privacy (KIE). These decisions were approved by the Council of Ministers on 26 December 2024, which included criteria, documentation, and procedures for identifying individuals belonging to national minorities (European Union, 2023).

Related to the “Functioning of Democratic Institutions” roadmap was adopted through the Council of Ministers' Decision No. 611, dated October 2, 2024, titled "On the Approval of the Roadmap for the Functioning of Democratic Institutions." The Ministry of Justice and the Minister of State for Relations with the Parliament are the primary institutions responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the roadmap (Council of Ministers, 2024). In July 2024, an amendment to the Electoral Code was approved, which enables Albanian citizens residing abroad to vote, fulfilling a requirement outlined by the Constitutional Court (GJK) (Constitutional Court, 2024). The Central Election Commission (CEC) adopted a regulatory package concerning the identification, registration, and voting of overseas voters, which included Decision No. 10, dated October 23, 2024, regarding the registration process and Decision No. 11, dated November 1, 2024, specifying the required documentation for verifying residency status (Central Election Commission, 2024). Moreover, Decision No. 194, dated November 7, 2024, by the State Election Commissioner, set the technical rules for managing requests for overseas voter registration through the Electoral Register System (PER) (State Election Commissioner, 2024). The Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) also adopted Regulation No. 40, dated April 26, 2024, which sets the requirements for reviewing changes in media ownership structures (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2024). AMA published a report on media ownership transparency on its website, complying with the EU integration obligations (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2024). In addition, the establishment of the Joint Industry Committee for audience measurement, followed by the release of the annual media market data bulletin, contributed to enhanced transparency in the media sector (Audiovisual Media Authority, 2024). The Post-Legislative Review Methodology was approved by the Conference of Presidents on October 9, 2024 (Albanian Parliament, 2024). This methodology aims to guide the post-legislative scrutiny process of laws and their implementation by permanent parliamentary committees. The Parliament has also developed an action plan for enhancing transparency, which includes 26 main measures and 6 sub-measures, of which 21 measures have been fully implemented as of

July 2024 (Albanian Parliament, 2024). Furthermore, transparency initiatives within the Parliament include live broadcasts of committee and plenary sessions, as well as the publication of parliamentary documents online, ensuring that the public and media are fully informed (Albanian Parliament, 2024). Involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the parliamentary process has also been strengthened, with the publication of annual reports on their participation and the establishment of a civil society engagement coordinator (Albanian Parliament, 2024). The Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MSHMS) is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the "Roadmap for a Supportive Environment for Civil Society," with ongoing efforts to overcome institutional challenges (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024). The final roadmap document is expected to be launched in early 2025, and discussions regarding proposed amendments to VAT guidelines for CSOs are ongoing (Ministry of Health and Social Protection, 2024).

The implementation of the "Public Administration Reform Roadmap" is guided by the decision of the Council of Ministers No. 737, dated December 13, 2023, titled "On the Approval of the Roadmap for the Public Administration Reform 2023-2030" (Council of Ministers, 2023). The institution responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the RAP is the Department of Public Administration (DAP), under the oversight of the Minister of State for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption, who serves as the political leader of the reform and the chief negotiator of the Public Administration Reform. During 2024, significant measures have been taken to finalize the strategic document for the 2030 Public Administration Reform. This includes the drafting of the Strategic Document for the Public Administration Reform (SNRAP 2030), the Action Plan covering all strategic pillars, and the finalization of the performance indicator passport (Council of Ministers, 2024). In the framework of the Public Finance Management Strategy (PFMS) 2023-2030, the strategy was approved through Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 390 on June 12, 2024, aligning with the National Strategy for Development and European Integration (NSDIE) 2022–2030 (Council of Ministers, 2024). The main goal is to establish a public finance management system ensuring transparency, accountability, fiscal discipline, efficiency, and equality in the use of public resources, while facilitating Albania's swift integration into the European Union. The Digital Agenda Strategy for Albania was approved

by the Council of Ministers with Decision No. 370 on June 1, 2022 (Council of Ministers, 2022). By September 2024, 43% of the activities in the Digital Agenda Strategy's Action Plan had been completed (Council of Ministers, 2024). Efforts to improve policy coordination and alignment with national and international development objectives have been enhanced through the reorganization and simplification of the Integrated Policy Management Groups (IPMG) and thematic teams. This aims to foster effective cross-sectoral collaboration, strategic planning, and proper resource allocation. SASPAC (the Agency for the Support of Public Administration and Policy Coordination) began revising the Prime Minister's Order No. 90, dated August 1, 2023, to reflect changes in ministry responsibilities and the definition of policy areas within the Integrated Policy Management Groups (IPMGs) (SASPAC, 2023). Furthermore, policy monitoring and reporting have been improved through the introduction of the Integrated Strategic Planning Information System (IPSIS), with SASPAC working alongside the National Agency for Information Society (AKSHI) to maintain and enhance this system (AKSHI, 2023). The new sectoral and cross-sectoral strategies are also aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, with SASPAC continuing to provide support to relevant decision-making institutions to ensure each strategic document is developed in line with the SDGs. In preparation for the 2030 SDGs, the first draft of the SDG Implementation Roadmap has been completed, with approval expected from the Inter-Institutional Committee for Sustainable Development in the first quarter of 2025 (Inter-Institutional Committee, 2025). Moreover, the drafting of the three-year Priority Policy Document (DPP) has included national strategies, economic reforms, and EU integration plans, ensuring an effective allocation of resources and strategic decision-making, aligned with societal developments and the results of the most recent census (Council of Ministers, 2024).

The introduction of the National Projects List (NSPP) has also been incorporated into the decision-making process, with the 2025-2027 DPP and NSPP approved in March 2024 (Council of Ministers, 2024). This medium-term planning document highlights the new EU growth plan for 2024-2027 as a government reform priority, as well as the restructuring of key development sectors, such as EU Integration, Anti-Corruption, Agriculture, Tourism, Digitalization, and Energy (Council of Ministers, 2024). The National Plan for European

Integration (NPEI) 2025-2027 has been developed outlining the legal and policy measures, institutional and administrative steps, and investment actions that will be implemented by ministries and other institutions up to 2027 (Secretariat for European Integration, 2024). Regarding civil service and human resource management, salary increases for civil servants are planned for 2025, with executive-level positions expected to see an increase of 11-16% compared to 2023 levels. This is part of the broader government policy for civil service reform, which began in 2023. In 2024, the second phase of salary increases was completed, benefiting around 36,000 employees in educational and other non-teaching roles (Council of Ministers, 2024). Additionally, significant adjustments have been made to salary structures for managerial positions, aimed at counteracting attrition and motivating qualified staff to compete for higher-level roles (Council of Ministers, 2024). Recruitment procedures for senior managerial positions are being streamlined, with an emphasis on merit-based hiring and improved application assessment processes (Council of Ministers, 2024). Organizational improvements, accountability, and transparency are being strengthened through the amendment of Law No. 90/2012 on the Organization and Functioning of the State Administration. These amendments, which are expected to be completed by December 2024, aim to create an effective accountability framework for subordinate institutions (Council of Ministers, 2024). Furthermore, secondary legislation related to open data and the reuse of public sector information was enacted in 2023, with the drafting of a secondary act for public sector information reuse expected by January 2025 (Council of Ministers, 2023). The public service delivery are being prioritized, with a focus on enhancing electronic services and simplifying administrative processes.

A new inter-institutional task force has been formed to streamline procedures for public services, and monitoring of online and offline public services is being increased to improve real-time efficiency (Council of Ministers, 2024).

5. CONCLUSION

Advancing Albania's EU accession process through the "Fundamentals" cluster is crucial to ensuring the country's alignment with the EU's core values and standards. The Opening Benchmarks in areas such as the rule of law, human rights, public administration, and democratic institutions are instrumental in guiding Albania's transformation towards a more transparent, accountable, and effective governance system. As highlighted throughout this article, the implementation of these benchmarks is not merely a procedural requirement but a strategic mechanism aimed at fostering long-term structural reforms and institutional convergence with EU norms. The successful completion of these reforms relies heavily on Albania's commitment to both political will and the effective capacity of its institutions. The roadmaps, such as the Rule of Law Roadmap and the Public Administration Reform Roadmap, represent key milestones in the country's progress. However, the true challenge lies in translating these strategic documents into tangible outcomes. Monitoring, inter-institutional coordination, and ensuring the sustainability of these reforms will be crucial for their success. The EU's enlargement methodology plays a significant role in incentivizing this progress, with Albania's efforts being continuously evaluated through structured monitoring and reporting mechanisms. While significant strides have been made, challenges remain in ensuring that reforms are both comprehensive and irreversible. The Opening Benchmarks not only test Albania's political commitment but also the capacity of its institutions to internalize and enforce the required changes. Moving forward, Albania must continue its efforts to strengthen governance structures, enhance the rule of law, and promote democratic values to ensure that these benchmarks lead to lasting change. In conclusion, Albania's path toward EU integration, particularly in the "Fundamentals" cluster, presents both challenges and opportunities. By maintaining a focus on the rule of law, human rights, public administration, and democratic institutions, Albania can secure the necessary reforms for a successful EU accession process. The continuous engagement of both political leaders and citizens, along with the effective implementation of EU-driven reforms, will be key to ensuring Albania's readiness for EU membership, while fostering stability, transparency, and accountability in the long term.

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