

## The particularities of EU-Albania mutual relations and the continuing challenge of integration

Assoc. Prof. PhD. Eva Tafili

PhD. Lumnis Çela

### Abstract

During the transition years the integration agenda into EU has been characterized by a mix of achievements, featuring limitations and failures. Given the interest expressed by the EU to bring all Western Balkan countries within the Union, the case of Albania can illustrate some characteristic features that explain the slow pace of integration.

Albania's ambition to reunite with Europe emerged immediately after the collapse of the communism. The idea of change has been equated with the legitimate but premature desire of the Albanians to become part of the Western European family, thus entering a path of complex transformations, which started through many difficulties of the first decade of transition, and then continued with an attractive and tiring challenge of integration that is still far from being crowned with membership. EU integration is perceived more as an external socio-economic and political benefit with abundant welfare of all kinds, free movement, democratic rights, tolerance, etc., rather than an internal commitment with institutional responsibilities both political and legal, implementation of reforms, compliance with legal standards, free and fair competition, etc. So, it is an imperative to narrow the gap between exaggerated high expectations and deserved tangible benefits.

The role of the European Commission as a supporter and promoter of reforms is shown undeniable, given the two-year delay of the Albanian political class in agreeing and aligning with the relevant institutional requirements.

**Keywords:** EU, Albania, integration, transition.

### Introduction

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Albania's ambition to reunite with Europe emerged immediately after the collapse of the communism. The idea of change has been equated with the legitimate but premature desire of the Albanians to become part of the Western European family, thus entering a path of complex transformations, which started through many difficulties of the first decade of transition, and then continued with an attractive and tiring challenge of integration that is still far from being crowned with membership. EU integration is perceived more as an external socio-economic and political benefit with abundant welfare of all kinds, free movement, democratic rights, tolerance, etc., rather than an internal commitment with institutional responsibilities both political and legal, implementation of reforms, compliance with legal standards, free and fair competition, etc. Therefore, it is imperative to reduce the gap between high and exaggerated expectations and deserved tangible benefits. The role of the European

Commission as a supporter and promoter of reforms in this regard is shown undeniable, given the two-year delay of the Albanian political class in agreeing and aligning with the relevant institutional requirements.

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The diplomatic relations between Albania and the European Community began in 1991. Taking such a historic step towards the long-awaited opening with foreign countries was not only a diplomatic objective, but also a utilitarian need, as it stimulated the significant next step of the signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, carried out on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1992, thus concretizing the Albanian efforts to get closer to European neighbours and benefit from their assistance. As a result of this agreement, relations between the two sides have been strengthened further, thus giving Albania the opportunity to benefit not only from preferential trade regimes, but also from various funding through the PHARE Program.<sup>1</sup> The latter alone provided to Albania about €700 million in support in some sectors in line with the reforms undertaken during the period 1992-2000<sup>2</sup>, in addition to other assistance and food aid of €318 million over the period '91-'93,<sup>3</sup> or grants and multimillion-dollar loans conceded at different times. As such, PHARE as a whole was guided and characterized by constructive and developmental features, which have been of considerable importance in this first phase of the transition.

In the context of this increased attention and spirit of cooperation with the Western European factor, at the beginning of 1995 Albania dared politically to formally request the opening of negotiations for an association agreement with the EU, but the assessments of the European Commission considered it a premature step towards the signing of "classic" agreements concerning the possibility of free exchange of goods, services and capital with Albania, similar to those between the EU and other candidate countries.<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, the serious problems created during the May

<sup>1</sup> VESHI, Denard: 'The long process of transformation in Albania in the context of the EU integration process', in *European Union and legal reform 2012*, (ed), Marko Milenkovic, Centre for constitutional studies and democratic development. (Igalo Series, 2012);

<sup>2</sup> KUKO, Valbona: "*Stabilization and association process in Albania and institutional framework*", Director of European integration directory, Ministry of European Integration, (2003), f. 1. Source: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/11870789.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> MEKSI, Ermelinda: 'The Albanian dimension of integration', in *Debating integration*, (ed.) Albert Rakipi, Albanian institute for international studies, (Tirana, 2003), f. 13.

<sup>4</sup> BOGDANI, Mirela & LOUGHLIN, John: "*Albania and the European Union: the tumultuous journey towards integration and accession*", I.B. Tauris, (London, 2009), f. 116.

1996 parliamentary elections<sup>5</sup>, followed by the devastating events of 1997, restored the old status quo in contractual relations between the EU and Albania, thus showing how quickly a country like Albania could deviate from the right path of reforms, and how efforts and fruits of labour could be wasted when the short-term interests of political groups became dominant or turned to populism.<sup>6</sup>

In December 2000, the European Council established the program of Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization (CARDS) as a new financial instrument for the Western Balkan countries<sup>7</sup>, which would be essentially more inclined to an integrative approach than the previous program PHARE which generally had an evolutionary trend. In this context, the Union decided to intensify cooperation with Albania also through the creation of a High-Level Task Force which aimed to assess the country's capacity<sup>8</sup>, as well as to identify areas where improvements were needed in order to meet the obligations that would be set by the expected agreement with the EU. After a series of meetings in Tirana, the European Commission decided that the prospect of opening negotiations for a Stabilization and Association Agreement with Albania was the best way to keep the pace of political and economic reforms in the country although much remained to be done.<sup>9</sup> Finally, these negotiations were formally opened on January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2003 by the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, whose main attitude was the construction of bridges and not their destruction, the opening of borders and not their closing, as well as the restoration of commercial relationships and not their deterioration.<sup>10</sup>

Logically, it was not thought to carry out this process in other way than complying with standards, in line with the EU requirements. However, as evidenced in the progress reports of the European Commission<sup>11</sup>, the highly polarized political environment (among others), was one of the main obstacles to the further advancement of the country. Nevertheless, the first serious step on Albania's journey to the European Union was reached with the signing in June 2006 of the Stabilization and Association Agreement<sup>12</sup> (which was finally ratified by all EU member states in January 2009, after a period in which Albania faced a series of image problems and instability). This historic and important moment marked the transition to a new stage, in which Albania positioned itself more convincingly in its relations with the EU<sup>13</sup>, although

<sup>5</sup> VICKERS, Miranda & PETTIFER, James: "Albania – from anarchy to Balkan identity", (London, 1997), f. 280.

<sup>6</sup> MEKSI, Ermelinda: "The Albanian dimension of integration", f. 16.

<sup>7</sup> HOFFMANN, Judith: "Integrating Albania: the role of the European Union in the democratization process", *Albanian journal of politics*, I (1), (2005), f. 60. Source: <http://ajp.alpsa.org/archives/issue11/hoffmann>;

<sup>8</sup> MEKSI, Ermelinda: cited above, f. 14.

<sup>9</sup> XHUVANI, Erjola: "Albania and its road towards European Union accession", in: *The 1st International conference on 'Research and education – challenges towards the future'* (24-25 Maj 2013). Source: <http://konferenca.unishk.edu.al/icrae2013/icraecd2013/doc/415.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> PRODI, Romano: "Croatia's journey towards EU membership", speech 03/360, President of the European Commission. Croatian Parliament (Zagreb, 10 July 2003). Source: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-03-360\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-03-360_en.htm)

<sup>11</sup> European Commission, 'Albania 2005 Progress Report', COM (2005) 561 final (Brussels, 9 November 2005), f. 8. and European Commission, 'Albania 2007 Progress Report', Commission Staff Working Document COM (2007) 663 final (Brussels, 6 November 2007), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> TARIFA, Fatos: "*Europa e pabashkuar*", (Tiranë, Ombra GVG, 2009), p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> O'BRENNAN, John & GASSIE, Esmeralda: "From stabilization to consolidation", p. 64; J. Goxha,

this “was more a European favour than a reward for what Albania had achieved.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, Albania began to benefit from financial and structural assistance and support through the new Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which since January 2007 replaced the previous programs.

On 9 November 2010, in its Opinion on Albania’s application for candidate status, the Commission stated that Albania should still make efforts to reach an acceptable level of compliance with the necessary criteria before the opening of negotiations. However, even with the imposition of this clause, the abolition of the Schengen visa regime a day before the publication of European Commission Opinion, as well as a year and a half after the entry into force of the SAA, officially turned Europe into a tangible reality for many Albanian citizens who for several decades had dreamed of freedom of movement.<sup>15</sup> Although this act was interpreted as quite positive in terms of the symbolic integration of Albanians in Europe, in terms of economic and political development the country continued to face difficulties due to the failure to comply with some fundamental internal standards.

The role of the European Commission as a supporter and promoter of reforms was undeniable, given the two-year delay of the Albanian political class in agreeing and aligning with the relevant institutional requirements. As a result, on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012 the Commission recommended that Albania be granted candidate country status provided that some key measures be adopted. On June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 Albania finally received the candidate status after a series of previous failed attempts. In subsequent years, despite the presence of a number of multidimensional problems, Albania made significant progress on the path to integration, which was mostly due to the imposition exercised by the EU representatives, rather than by the Albanian political elite itself which has often obstructed this process due to the lack of dialogue between political forces.<sup>16</sup> Undoubtedly, April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, when the European Commission recommended for the first time the unconditional opening of membership negotiations, would mark another important date in Albania’s journey towards the EU. However, as long as integration is a dynamic and unpredictable process, everything remains to be evaluated progressively. Given these developments at the moment it seems that the Union’s attention to the region is still active, but it is worth noting that it’s up to the respective countries to accelerate (or not) the pace of integration and regain the time lost.

Generally, during the transition years the integration agenda has been characterized by a mix of achievements, featuring limitations and failures. Given the interest expressed by the EU to bring all Western Balkan countries within the Union, the case of Albania can illustrate some characteristic features that explain the slow pace of integration.

As for the *first factor*, Albania’s separation from its totalitarian past was somewhat unclear in the early 1990s, when some old apparatchiks managed to survive regime “Albania-EU relationship and the course towards the European integration”, *EIRP proceedings, international relations in the contemporary world*, vol.11 (Danubius University Press, 2016).

Source: <http://www.proceedings.univ-danubius.ro/index.php/eirp/article/view/1683/1853>

<sup>14</sup> TARIFA, Fatos: cited above, p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> XHUVANI, Erjola & KANE, Edit: “Integration of Western Balkans towards EU”, *International journal of interdisciplinary research*, SIPARUNTON, Vol.1, Issue 2 (October 2012), pp. 448-449.

<sup>16</sup> GOXHA, Jeta: “Albania-EU relationship and the course towards the European integration”, above cited; and MIREL, Pierre: “*The Western Balkans: between stabilization and integration in the European Union*”, (23 January 2018). Foundation Robert Schuman, European Issues, No.459. Source: <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/>

change, often circulating through key positions in government structures, as well as at high political levels and economic power. Similar to other neighbouring countries in the region, in Albania the post-communist elites, who took control of the new system, had strong ties to the former regime, thus converting part of their former power, both into political and economic power<sup>17</sup>, by activating the so-called Nomenclature Privatization mechanism, through which former officials at the highest political levels of the communist regime, or even at the lower ones, were gradually turned into owners of economic assets. As a result, they managed to resist the EU reform agenda for years to come. However, compared to the vicious circle of the first post-communist decade, when the aforementioned phenomenon was more prominent, the advent of the new century brought a much better atmosphere. The country tended to accumulate more "human capital", be it individual political leaders, political parties or social groups, who were more loyal to the political principles of negotiation and compromise, as well as more sympathetic to the integration project. But these reformers often proved too weak to undertake radical change, thus getting stuck between new hybrid institutions and old opportunistic structures, which could lose everything from a radical reform.<sup>18</sup> As a result of these obstacles, was observed a slowdown of the country's Europeanization processes, and a slowdown in the pace of its integration into the EU as well.

Regarding the second factor, Albania, like the rest of the post-communist Western Balkan countries, was certainly not a favourable environment for the presentation and development of the political culture of liberal democracy.<sup>19</sup> The communist historical legacy of almost half a century was somewhat problematic for all countries in the region, which were characterized by a general weakness of reformist groups, lack of previous democratic experiences, long and calcified state-society relations, poor socio-economic development, previous totalitarian regimes, as well as somewhat harsh and chaotic transition.<sup>20</sup> In the Albanian context, the violent overthrow of state authority in 1997 and the destabilization of 1998, due to a conflicting political culture demonstrated by the parties, proved that these parties were as "infected" as their communist predecessor, considering their political opponents as "enemies."<sup>21</sup> This picture, on one hand, illustrates the dramatic impact that the aforementioned factors had on the further path during the country's transition, which was encountered especially in the first post-communist decade, while, on the other hand, it explains the difficult and fluctuating trajectory of democratization, integration and Europeanization that Albania would follow in later years.

As for the *third factor*, the concept of the weak state, for many analysts it is compared to an elephant which you cannot describe accurately, but you are sure to notice it the moment you see it. A weak state is generally associated with a lack of sufficient infrastructural capacity to exercise state authority as well as to establish the rule of law.

<sup>17</sup> "European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans. Europeanization or Business as Usual?", Edited by Arolda Elbasani, Published by Routledge, September 12, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> "European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans. Europeanization or Business as Usual?", Edited by Arolda Elbasani, Published by Routledge, September 12, 2014, p.10

<sup>19</sup> BIBERAJ, Elez: "Albania in transition: the rocky road to democracy", in 1998 by Westview Press, p.119; Artan Fuga, 'Media, politika, shoqëria, 1990-2000: ikja nga kompleksi i Rozafës', (Tirana, Dudaj, 2008), p. 467.

<sup>20</sup> "European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans. Europeanization or Business as Usual?", Edited by Arolda Elbasani, Published by Routledge, September 12, 2014, p.11.

<sup>21</sup> RADOVANOVIK, Tamara: "From 'Balkanization' to 'Europeanization' of the Western Balkan countries", American International Journal of Contemporary Research, 2(4), 207-214 p. 209;

Furthermore, in parallel with the essential political, economic and social challenges, several other problems emerge, among the most demanding, such as corruption and organized crime. Overall, the irregular transitions have created great opportunities for the ruling elites to undermine the state through the “privatization” of decision-making mechanisms and through the exercise of government privileges for patronage interests. This type of state, partly captivated by certain interests and often subject to predatory projects of elites eager to take advantage of state resources<sup>22</sup>, generally lacked the capacity and readiness to carry out the necessary reforms and implement integration political visions to European family. Consequently, the difficult (not to say failed) process of building institutions capable of overcoming any kind of problem such as those mentioned above, was not just an issue which delayed the country’s integration steps for a time relatively long, but it was also a challenge which still to this day continues to condition and determine Albania’s future perspective towards the Union.

In the context of efforts to understand and explain more deeply the role and position of some of the actors present in Albania’s integration developments during its difficult journey to the EU, as can be distinguished the political class, civil society, and the international factor, there have often been uncertainties regarding the concrete responsibilities of one or the other party. The question that still remains in force and that arouses considerable interest, is related to the fact whether these actors have demonstrated readiness and willingness to engage in radical change during the long years of transition or have simply been involved in superficial corrections by those of decorative type?

The experience so far in Albania has shown that the actors who have played the role of defenders of the status quo, until the moment of possible acceptance or not of the change, have been precisely the political parties and political class. However, these actors, although openly appearing in support of international norms and rules, have often been hidden violators of them. This political class has accepted the role of the actor of change only in those cases when its interests have not been affected or endangered by the requirements and conditions set. Seen from this point of view, it can be said that the two main Albanian political parties and the entire political class as a whole, have functioned more as defenders of the status quo, than as actors of change, when it comes to the de facto application of best international standards in certain matters. Considering that this internal environment has not only not deprived these actors of the exclusive privileges of power, but has instead guaranteed them in this regard, we have the right to believe the positioning of the political class in defence of the status quo.

Unfortunately, the communist legacy of the past left Albania completely unprepared and without any previous experience regarding the development of an independent and healthy spirit. Despite the fact that during the transition period many non-governmental/non-profit organizations and associations, in general is possible to say that Albanians showed a high level of indifference to active involvement in civic activities, which was mostly a typical element of transitional societies with a considerable level of inequality.<sup>23</sup> In addition to this somewhat massive atrophy,

<sup>22</sup> KRASDEV, Ivan: “The Balkans: Democracy Without Choices”, *Journal of Democracy*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 13, Number 3, July 2002, 10.1353/jod.2002.0046, p.50.

<sup>23</sup> VURMO, Gjergji: “*Civil society index for Albania - in search for citizens and impact*”, CIVICUS, World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Tirana, 2010, p. 12. Source: <http://www.icnl.org/research/library/files/Albania/albaniacsoi.pdf>.

the fact that these organizations and associations were generally highly dependent on donations<sup>24</sup>, made it possible for them to often show obvious signs of bias, thus casting doubt on their credibility<sup>25</sup> with regard to the advanced example that they had to give to the rest of society, as actors of change as well. In this sense, even that limited part of society willing to get involved in civic organizations is often limited and withdrawn, either because of a reluctance to partner with the government, or because of a fear of raise its critical voice, thus allowing the political elite to be much more influential in the country's performance during the transition period.

Since the fall of communism, the Western international community has played an important role in Albania. Recall that the international presence has often been so prominent that this actor is also seen as the real opposition of the country or, at least, as a third party with an important role to play. If we take into account the general distrust of the Albanian people towards the political class regarding the changes, in addition to labelling it as responsible for the lack of progress of the country in the European reform agenda, then the weight of the international community, especially the EU, was often seen as something irreplaceable not to say vital to the fate of the country. Whenever Albania is plunged into situations of instability, unable to find common ground among political actors, the role of mediator has always been assigned to the international community. In this sense, the accented lack of initiative, the slow pace of development, and the laziness of the domestic political class, always waiting for the stimulation and direct involvement of the international factor in any reform process, has affected the progress and transformation of the country by making it slower than expected.

The EU has long regarded the enlargement process towards Western Balkan countries as an extraordinary opportunity and possibility to promote and support their political stability and economic well-being. This process has served as a powerful mechanism to help transform any aspiring state that has been willing to contribute to becoming part of the common European "club", through the adoption of its own internal norms and rules. This is related to the so-called "conditionality" which in general terms is considered as an instrument aimed at stimulating change in the Balkan region according to the requirements and projections of EU foreign policy. Relying on the principle of "obligation through reward", conditionality in its essence represents a norm and a standard, according to which countries in the aspiring members for EU membership will have the opportunity to have the will and willingness to meet a range of certain conditions.<sup>26</sup>

Considering that the Union formalized its serious long-term objectives towards the Western Balkan countries only at the end of the first decade of transition, through the proposal of the Stabilization and Association Process in 1999, it becomes clear that during the first years of the relationship between the EU and Albania lacked the strategy to influence all its possible positive effects. Consequently, the structural deficit of the Albanian state, combined with the tendency of local actors to be inspired and grouped mostly around nepotistic-clan networks based on short-term internal

<sup>24</sup> BALTACI, Cemal & ZENELAJ, Reina: "Democracy promotion in Albania", *Electronic journal of social sciences*, Vol. 12, Issue 44, 2013, p. 7. Source: <http://dergipark.gov.tr/download/article-file/70436>

<sup>25</sup> BALFOUR, Rosa & STRATULAT, Corina: "The democratic transformation of the Balkans", European Policy Centre, Issue Paper no.66, (November 2011), p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> SCHIMMELFENNIG, Frank & SEDELMEIER, Ulrich: "Governance by conditionality: EU rule transfer to the candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe", *Journal of European public policy*, (August 2004, Routledge). <https://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/>

interests and not around political-social programs aimed at long-term integration in the EU, continued to cause serious problems for the country's political and institutional stability, as well as for its economic efficiency,<sup>27</sup> especially during the mid-1990s. In this way, EU programs towards Albania would continue to be satisfied only with the implementation of the old principle of aid and assistance, regardless of whether or not the far-sighted pan-European criteria, such as those of Copenhagen, are met. Thus, the lack of necessary international pressure to seriously undertake the implementation of radical integration reforms in Albania, led to the lack of realistic objectives that could have led this country more quickly towards the European family. At the same time, the Union managed to draft the Stabilization and Association Process for those countries that had not reached a previous agreement with it, as was the case of Albania. Actually, Albania needed such attention more than ever because of the consequences it had felt from the successive crises of the pyramids, the collapse of the state, and the situation in Kosovo. Based on the principle of conditionality, this important and all-embracing process aimed at establishing closer relations between the EU and each respective Balkan country, according to which the EU in turn would set conditions the possible fulfilment of which would ensure the perspective of participating countries as candidates for membership. Such a perspective was not accidental as long as it would be confirmed two more times in a row at the close of the first post-communist decade, as happened at the Feira Summit and the Zagreb Summit in 2000. In this way, Albania had managed to advance its contractual relationship with the Union from the initial position of a trade cooperation and as a client of the PHARE program, towards a conditional bilateral relationship in the framework of the Stabilization and Association Process.<sup>28</sup>

In order to monitor the progress made by the Western Balkan countries in fulfilling their obligations towards their European partners, the Stabilization and Association Process was accompanied by the preparation of annual progress reports aimed at measuring the performance of each country concerned, as well as identifying areas where more work was needed, in line with the Copenhagen criteria. These reports, compiled by the European Commission, were intended to record and reflect the economic, political and legal situation of each of the aspiring country, separately, and their content served as the basis for the final EU assessments of whether or not existed the possibility that a particular country had the green light. In 2003, the President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, in his speech before the members of the Albanian Parliament, stressed that the progress of the talks would depend on the internal will to move forward with economic and political reforms.<sup>29</sup>

It's worth recalling a clear example of how the application of the "stick and carrot" mechanism managed to successfully fulfil the EU's goal of mediating (not to say ordering) the political compromise between Prime Minister Nano and opposition leader Berisha on electing a consensual president in July 2002.<sup>30</sup> It was precisely

<sup>27</sup> VICKERS, Miranda & PETTIFER, James: "Albania: From Anarchy to Balkan Identity", New York University Press, March 1st 2000, p. 282; GRECO, Ettore: "New Trends in Peace-Keeping: The Experience of Operation Alba", in *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 29, No. 2, June 1998, p. 203.

<sup>28</sup> "European Integration and Transformation in the Western Balkans. Europeanization or Business as Usual?", Edited by Arolda Elbasani, Published by Routledge, September 12, 2014, p.38.

<sup>29</sup> PRODI, Romano: "Albania's European destiny", European Commission, speech 03/43. (31 January 2003). Source: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_SPEECH-03-43\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-03-43_en.htm)

<sup>30</sup> FUGA, Artan: "Majtas jo djathtas: ndryshimi te socialistët shqiptarë në këndvështrimin e filozofisë politike bashkëkohore", Publisher ORA, 2003, p. 208.

the implementation of this new mechanism that led not only to the calming of the then conflicting political climate, but also to the formal opening of negotiations with the European Union about six months later. In 2005, the smooth transfer of power from the Left to the Right coalition allowed the integration process to take another important positive step forward, paving the way for the signing of the SAA on 12 June 12th, 2006, despite the modest progress the country had shown in several other sectors. However, the lack of proper harmonization between external conditionality and internal engagement made it possible for Albania's integration progress to be further delayed, given the fact that the Stabilization and Association Agreement itself took another three years until ratification and entry into force in 2009.

In the past, enlargement policy has often been portrayed as a choice between the "quick" alternative, that carried the risk of weak countries joining the EU and the "slow" alternative, that carried the risk of undermining the stabilization achievements and the applicability of the reforms undertaken by the aspiring countries for membership. Despite the courageous and challenging step of the Albanian government regarding the application for candidate status, to the country was set 12 key priorities that were specifically defined by the opinion of the European Commission in 2010 regarding the application in question. In this context, appreciating the need to address them, the government and the opposition launched in November 2011 a joint initiative, which led to some very valuable concrete results, which, among other things, testified to the transformative power of the European Union, as well as its key role in supporting reforms and as a catalyst for change.<sup>31</sup>

The unanimous but belated approval of the European Council, which granted candidate status to Albania in June 2014, although it was a very positive decision in its entirety and essence, can serve at the same time as a typical example that raised some doubts about the credibility of the membership process as a whole. The raising of such suspicions should not be considered an exaggeration, since it is based on the fact that even in cases where the recommendations of the European Commission were entirely positive, they implied the message that "the EU was not ready to accept Albania candidate status", and not the message that "Albania didn't deserve the candidate status."<sup>32</sup> Thus, in terms of progress towards the next station, which marks the opening of membership negotiations, Albania continued to remain again subject to the mechanism of "obligation through reward." Meanwhile, as rarely before, on July 22, 2016 the Albanian parliament unanimously approved the constitutional amendments on justice reform, in accordance with the imposition of foreign partners, especially of the US ambassador in Albania, Donald Lu - a reform that today turns out to be a complete failure, leaving the country not only without courts, but also with a politicized justice. With this move, Albania left the ball in the field of the European Commission, which subsequently, during the presentation of the annual Enlargement Package, recommended that EU member states consider the opening of membership negotiations with Albania.

The multiannual trajectory of Albania's transition, in addition of offering a range of social and political challenges, has also served as a transition path from the former model of state-planned economy, to current model of free market economy. In the

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, 'Albania – membership status', European neighborhood policy and enlargement negotiations (6.12.2016). Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/albania\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/countries/detailed-country-information/albania_en)

<sup>32</sup> Integrimi Evropian, "Historiku i marrëdhënieve BE-Shqipëri".  
<http://historiku.integrimi.gov.al/al/programi/historiku-i-marredhenieve-be-shqiperi>

first phase of the European interest in Albania, assistance and emergency aid, in particular those of a food nature, were mostly distinguished. The significant signing of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement in December 1992, as well as the inclusion of Albania in the framework of the PHARE assistance program, was not only the first concretization of Albanian efforts for rapprochement and support from European neighbours, but also the emergence of new opportunities for Albania. But despite such predictions on paper, the severe institutional and economic crisis of 1997 would inevitably lead to the reformulation of the EU strategy, causing the Strategic Document for Albania to undergo some changes in 1997. Because of this, further focus will be on restoring and improving governance and promoting civil society; formulation and implementation of secure economic and social policies; as well as revival of economic activity.<sup>33</sup>

In the context of the important geopolitical submissions of the EU during 2000, regarding the prospect of membership of Western Balkan aspiring countries in the European Union, the beginning of the new century would mark another important stage in the EU support plan for Albania. Thus, the total replacement of the PHARE program by the CARDS program in 2001 created the possibility that the funding would meet the strategic objectives of the Stabilization and Association Process. Shifting the EU focus from the reconstruction and economic support of the first post-communist decade to the integration support of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, would not sufficiently develop and transform the country's economic and political performance, which continued to be endangered by the lack of some basic preconditions related to backward infrastructure, weak institutions, high emigration, brain drain, etc.<sup>34</sup> For relatively deficient countries like Albania, premature efforts to meet EU standards would be ineffective, not to mention inappropriate, in the context of other more urgent transition needs and lack of adequate financial and administrative resources to fulfil them.

From 2007, after the preliminary signing of the SAA, EU funding to Albania would be channelled through a single unified instrument. As with other countries in the region, Albania finally began to benefit from financial and structural assistance and support through the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA), which would replace the previous CARDS program. Its extension during the 2007-2013 period would be guided by the objective of the country's financial and political support towards EU membership. The emphasis of the follow-up assistance was more on the quality of the financial assistance management as well as on the dissemination of the results achieved during the accession path, rather than the quantitative amount of financial assistance of 537 million euros<sup>35</sup> made available. However, the recent IPA program was an indication of the EU's increased focus and commitment to good governance, the rule of law and an efficient public administration, as these elements were considered the pillars of Albania's European partnership.

Approximately (but not limited to) these content lines, the further period 2014-2020

<sup>33</sup> HOFFMANN, Judith: "Integrating Albania: The Role of the European Union in the Democratization Process", *Albanian Journal of Politics*, I (1), 2005, p. 61.

<sup>34</sup> *Idem.* p.64.

<sup>35</sup> European Commission, '2013 annual report on financial assistance for enlargement (IPA, PHARE, CARDS, Turkey pre-accession instrument, Transition Facility)', *Commission Staff Working Document, SWD (2014) 287 final*, (Brussels, 30.09.2017), p. 82.

Source:

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1536400243529&uri=CELEX:52014SC0287>

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/>

would continue to be covered by a new framework for providing pre-accession assistance such as IPA II. Coverage of areas such as democracy and governance, rule of law, growth and competitiveness, cross-border and transnational cooperation in addition to the direct goals of transforming, approximating and promoting the respective sectors closer to EU standards, also shows the strong link the content of this assistance program with the forward-looking strategy of enlarging the Union with the beneficiary Balkan countries such as Albania. As can be seen on the whole, the EU's interest in Albania during all these years of transition has mainly been directed towards the sectors that would have ensured greater stability, security and cooperation not only within the country, but also around it. Although with subsequent programs Albania received significant financial assistance from the Union, its effects have not been fully in line with expectations, as Albania continued to remain in the group of the poorest countries of Europe even after a quarter of a century of transition. When trying to assess Albania's real progress in meeting the Copenhagen Criteria, which are the basis of success for the EU, it is important to consider another significant element. The typology and nature of the political conditions imposed by the EU over the last decade has gradually undergone an increasingly orientation towards elements such as the capacity of the state, the functioning of the public administration, and the judicial system. As Pridham points out in his argument, the EU has learned some valuable lessons from previous enlargements to Eastern countries, and has thus been forced to apply a more "muscular" condition to Western Balkan aspirant countries.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the application of various monitoring mechanisms is now much more detailed and demanding than ever, making such aspiring countries like Albania to face a much more challenging terrain in terms of enlargement, compared to other previous candidates.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in order to best maintain its integration trajectory, it is necessary for both sides to pursue their combined and coordinated efforts, as long as there is a common interest in implementing reforms and establishing a long-term stability scheme, which would guarantee the neutralization of any negative tendencies that could come from the lack of peace, security and prosperity. Despite the existing uncertainties and difficulties regarding the EU integration process, the most important is the fact that this process is already almost irreversible.<sup>38</sup> The presence of a variety of factors is likely to affect only the velocity of the process, but not the overall flow of integration. Due to its geographical position, the course of European integration remains a necessity and a strategic objective, as long as it serves to complement the geopolitical landscape where both parties are located.

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<sup>37</sup> O'BRENNAN, John & GASSIE, Esmeralda: "From stabilization to consolidation: Albanian state capacity and adaptation to European Union rules", *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 11 (1), 61-82, p. 71.

<sup>38</sup> RADOVANOVIK, Tamara: "From 'Balkanization' to 'Europeanization' of the Western Balkan countries", *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, 2(4), 207-214 p. 211.

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