



# BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief) • Katarzyna Staniewska (Managing Editor)  
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## Political Changes in Albania: A New Quality in the Integration Process with the EU?

**Tomasz Żornaczuk, Wiktor Hebda**

*On 16 October, the European Commission recommended granting Albania candidate status for EU membership. In this respect, the positive opinion of the OSCE about the Albanian parliamentary elections in June was of crucial importance. The acceleration of integration with the Union had been declared by the new government of Edi Rama as a priority in the foreign policy of Albania. However, widespread corruption and organised crime, and the poor economic condition of the country do not serve to achieve this goal. In order to keep the positive developments going in Albania, not only the EU but also the Member States should clearly support the government in Tirana in carrying out key reforms.*

**Challenges of Integration with the EU.** In a progress report on countries aspiring to EU membership, the Commission for a second time recommended that Albania be granted candidate status. In last year's report, along with welcoming some changes (including reform of Albania's electoral law), the Commission required further reforms as well as an improvement in the functioning of parliament. Therefore, in practice the EC's position suggested that the EU Council's postpone its decision until after the parliamentary elections in 2013. The change of government as a result of democratic elections, which in earlier periods had been questioned, brings the country closer to the EU. But this basic condition may turn out to be the easiest to meet. Other political criteria are in fact more ambitious and require radical reform.

Along with this year's recommendation to grant Albania candidate status—in response to its request for membership in April 2009—the Commission stressed the need for a more effective efforts to stem corruption and organised crime. The corruption perception index for Albania has in fact not changed for years, and as other countries in the region have made some progress, it has become the most corrupt in the Balkans in terms of the index. In addition, it is one of the leading producers of cannabis in Europe, and seizures of significant quantities of this drug by police (more than 20 tons in 2012 alone) has been accompanied by proportionally few convictions. This, in turn, raises questions about the effectiveness of state institutions and the independence of the judiciary, which are of particular concern to the EC.

A significant challenge also lies in economic reforms, to which the Commission gives a higher priority every year. Although the official unemployment rate in Albania remains at a relatively low level of 13% given the conditions arising from the global economic crisis, informally it may be twice as high. As well, even with economic growth of 2%, the country remains one of the poorest in Europe, with GDP per capita of a little over \$8,000. In order to remedy this situation, it will be necessary to recast the structure of the economy, as almost half of the population of Albania is employed by the inefficient agriculture sector.

**Prospects for Actions by the New Government.** The EC's recommendation bound by its conditions results in a situation in which Albania's expectations to be granted candidate status for membership at the next EU Council summit in December are not free of doubt. Therefore, the formation of the new government itself does not automatically mean a speeding up of integration with the EU. In fact, the priorities of Rama's cabinet largely overlap

with the strategies of previous governments: strengthen the rule of law and increase employment, along with a strategic foreign policy goal to integrate with the Union. What is more, many members of the new government, which was sworn in on 15 September, have no political leadership experience, a result of the Socialist Party of Albania's eight years of opposition. On the other hand, junior coalition partner, the Socialist Movement for Integration, had partnered with the outgoing government as well and is now responsible for proportionally more ministries than the party of Prime Minister Rama. This experience may affect the standards of the new cabinet.

However, the Socialists have the potential to enact reform that the previous government was lacking. They enjoy greater public support, already evident in the local elections in 2011. Also, the establishment of government after free and fair elections results in a better external image, which in turn can be translated into more intensive support from the EU and the greater involvement of Member States in the democratisation of Albania. These factors give the government both a stronger social mandate and more instruments of support—also in financial terms—to carry out internal reforms, including unpopular ones. In this context, some importance may also be placed on a declaration by the new leader of the opposition, Lulzim Basha, who announced the readiness of the Democrats to cooperate with the government to conduct the necessary reforms to bring Albania closer to the EU. This is a new situation because a characteristic feature of Albania's government has been a political crisis since the last vote in 2009 resulted in a boycott of parliamentary work by the opposition Socialists, who accused the government of electoral fraud. The paralysis of the parliament resulted in a lack of key reforms, and this is why naming the acceleration of Albania's integration into the EU a priority was largely declarative in nature.

The success of the new cabinet's actions will depend on the effectiveness of turning the government's potential into the determination and consistency to carry out strategic reforms. The prime minister's vision is to create a new state model in Albania based on an effective fight against corruption and organised crime, reconstruction of the administration, and improvement of the judiciary, as well as the transformation of the economic and social system. The first action to meet these criteria is to reform the police by reducing the officer corps by almost 70% and by the appointment of new management. Furthermore, the government has announced the creation of a National Bureau of Investigation to combat corruption and organised crime. The government programme also is aimed at changes in regulations on the functioning of the Constitutional Court and amendment of the criminal code. Besides these efforts, one key reform will be the decentralisation of administration, which was welcomed by the OSCE and EU ambassadors in Tirana. The day after the EC recommendations were announced, the Albanian parliament adopted amendments to the law on civil service.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** The emergence of a democratically elected parliament opens real prospects for Albania for integration with the Union, which is reflected in the recommendations of the EC. However, the ambitious goal of a smooth start to accession talks with the EU will be difficult to achieve. Despite a lack of problems common elsewhere in the Western Balkans (Albania was not a participant in recent wars in the region, has no disputes with its neighbours, and does not have numerous national minorities), the country faces challenges related to the lack of reform over the past two decades. Hence, it is hard to expect an above-standard pace of integration with the EU. Although the government's declarations of interest in reform and recent actions to demonstrate this, along with the desire to prove there is a new quality among Albania's ruling elites, the announced changes will be time-consuming, and their implementation may encounter difficulties, including financial.

However, now more than ever, there are political circumstances for the transformation of the state, as it was demonstrated—among other things—by the cooperation between the government and the opposition to improve the administration. Therefore, the new political situation in Albania and the trends following from it should result in EU Member States eventually confirming candidate status to the country. This would mobilise the government in Tirana to make further efforts to maintain both the standards it has set and to continue reforms based on European values. At the same time, new circumstances in Albania should encourage the Member States to increase their commitment to the transformation of the country.

This is an opportunity to revive cooperation between Poland and Albania, which would be in line with the tradition of Polish support for the processes of democratisation in countries undergoing political and economic transformations. In view of the specific obstacles faced by Albania at this stage, it would be worth focusing on one of the country's particular problems. Poland may offer to share its experience over a period of years with combating organised crime, mainly in relation to curtailing drugs. On the one hand, this could include sharing knowledge in operational actions and the building of state institutions to deal with the phenomenon, such as the Polish Central Bureau of Investigation, which would go in line with the reforms announced by the new government of Albania. On the other hand, it could also share its experience with amending the law and court procedures, including increased protection of witnesses. These are the areas Poland have to offer as an example of a country that has had a drug transit and production problem and coped with it properly. In addition, the political changes will improve the conditions for foreign investments in Albania. It may be in the interest of Polish companies that deal with energy or have experience with the modernisation of outdated technologies. Also, it will open new opportunities for companies involved in tourism—one part of the Albanian economy that will increase significantly in the coming years.