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ALBANIA



Dealing with “enlargement fatigue” to avoid “patience fatigue”

Discussing the Staged accession model in the Albanian context

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Introduction

On January 31, 2003, the then president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, visited Tirana and held a speech in the Albanian parliament, declaring the opening of negotiations for signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the EU and Albania. Almost 20 years later, on July 19, 2022, Albania officially started the accession negotiations. During these two decades, the country has slowly gone through all the classic steps foreseen for the Western Balkans in their membership perspective: from signing the SAA, to achieving the candidate status and fulfilling priorities for starting the accession talks. The main challenges in this long journey have mostly been domestic, including weak institutional capacities and a lack of a political culture of compromise and cooperation. However, especially in the recent decade, an additional obstacle has been added: the unpopularity of the enlargement policy in the EU. In October 2013, the European Commission recommended granting Albania the candidate status. The Council of December 2013 failed to take a decision, postponing it for June 2014, with at least five member states expressing scepticism. In October 2018, again, the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations with Albania, yet, amidst a new methodology process, Bulgarian veto, etc., member states did not take a decision and negotiations started only four years later, in July 2022.

The unpredictability and the continuous decrease of credibility of the process require a thorough discussion and debate about new ideas on how to improve the enlargement policy and progress of aspiring countries. Any further deterioration of the perspective based on uncertainties coming from member states might trigger what Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama called the “patience fatigue”, reflecting a loss of interest in the membership perspective and lowering EU influence in the region, making the latter even more exposed to instability and other global actors’ agendas. In this context, the aim of this paper is to explore the Staged accession model and its relevance and practical applicability in the Albanian case. First, there is a focused discussion on the shortcomings of enlargement policy and conditionality, by going through the revised methodology as well and what it brings to the table. Second, the paper critically introduces the Staged accession model and its ramifications in the Albanian context, especially in terms of potential obstacles and opportunities. To conclude, the study assumes a more empirical approach by assessing the applicability of the model, based on the Albania’s preparedness indicators provided by the European Commission’s reports, with the aim of analysing the specific dynamic of the country in terms of stages.

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Despite the successes achieved over the years, enlargement as a policy and conditionality as a tool seem to have reached a saturation point. Among others, this was expressed by President Macron in the October 2019 summit, when the EU, under his spell, failed to keep its end of the deal by opening negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia. A variety of factors have brought to this point, including enlargement fatigue and its components, very low support for enlargement among the EU citizens (French included),⁵ which impacts domestic elections and political behaviour, high politicisation of the process, lack of strategic vision at EU level, a weakening leadership role of the Commission in enlargement, growing gaps within member states (old and new), etc.

The enlargement impasse and the not-so-new revised methodology

The EU Enlargement policy has been one of the main components of the European Union project since its inception, as well as the integration of former communist countries through its transformative power.¹ Articles 2 and 49 of the Treaty on European Union stipulate that any aspiring European state can join the Union if it accepts the values and norms of the EU, as well as commits to apply them rigorously.² Based on the Copenhagen criteria adopted in 1993, the EU has expanded several times to reach the current dimension of 27 members. Enlargement is considered one of the most successful EU strategies for the Europe-

1 Grabbe, H. (2006). *The EU’s Transformative power. Europeanisation through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

2 Consolidated version of the Treaty on European Union. Official Journal of the European Union, 2012.

3 Schimmelfennig, F. and Sedelmeier, U. (2005). *The Europeanisation of Central and Eastern Europe*. New York: Cornell University Press.

4 Grabbe, H. (2002). European Union Conditionality and the *acquis communautaire*, *International Political Science Review*, 23 (3): pp. 249-268.

5 Hübner, C., Eichhorn, J. and Molthof, L. (2021). [It’s the EU, not Western Balkan Enlargement...French public opinion on EU membership of the Western Balkans](#). Open Society Foundations.

There are plenty of arguments and valid theories on why enlargement policy is at this point. However, to simplify, the current status can be summed in two main aspects: domestic reforms in the Western Balkans not delivering and EU member states being hesitant and inward-looking. In this context, after the President Macron's request to review the process format, Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Olivér Várhelyi, while presenting the revised enlargement methodology, pointed out that "the purpose is to re-establish a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans". Reiterating the credibility of the perspective in the title of each strategic documents produced in the recent years says plenty on the health of enlargement policy and the position that the Commission has been put in by member state.

In this context, the revised methodology tries to contribute to improving the modalities, and, as a consequence, the outcome of the enlargement agenda. However, despite its intentions, the methodology requires additional elements to overcome the already faced shortcomings in the enlargement process. First, stressing the fact that member states can be involved more in the process does not guarantee a smoother decision-making approach. In the recent years, Albania has already "suffered" the consequences of individual member states undertaking the so-called "peer missions", with MPs of national parliaments visiting Albanian institutions and duplicating some of the Commission's work. Of course, in general terms, EU accession includes a process of knowing each other. However, well-equipped actors (such as the Commission) have been mandated to do the heavy lifting in this regard and provide member states with exhaustive information and analysis on each country's progress. Acceding countries' institutional capacities are far too weak to potentially deal with so many actors, groups, delegations, states, etc. contemporarily, as efforts should be concentrated on reforms. The revised methodology does not seem to strengthen the role of the Commission as a gatekeeper for the above; instead, it leaves acceding countries in a state of confusion on who does what in the Second, the reversibility principle will not necessarily strengthen conditionality in terms of helping the reform processes. Politically speaking, so far, at any point during the accession negotiations, one or more member states have the power to stop the process for one or more chapters by vetoing (opening, closing, benchmarks, etc.), if they notice backsliding or any wrongdoing by the acceding country. In this regard, it is difficult to see how the revised methodology would be able to promote progress in national reforms; instead, there is a potential risk that it might only provide placebo elements for member states' internal political discourse.

In addition, this element does not come with any expressed assurance or commitment that member states will behave according with the Commission's recommendations when voting, hence, it does not improve credibility of the process, on either side. Therefore, there is a need to fill in the gap in this direction by providing incentives throughout different stages, which is also the purpose of the model presented in this paper.

Following the 2012 new "rule of law approach", the 2014 take on "fundamentals first", and the 2018 "credible enlargement strategy", with the 2020 new methodology the EU once again failed to face and address some of the real shortcomings of the EU enlargement policy and its low impact in pushing reforms in the Western Balkans with the desired speed. External geostrategic factors, such as the war in Ukraine, might temporarily push forward the enlargement agenda and political will of member states, but these would not be able to sustain the needed reforms for achieving the EU standards. To ensure that accession negotiations mean tangible transformation of Albanian society and its institutions, a larger and deeper debate on the process, its shortcomings and new approaches needs to take place. The proposed Staged accession model could provide good grounds for this discussion.

Staged accession model – risks and opportunities for Albania

The proposed Staged accession model is based on two important assumptions:

- the first one is that the current enlargement approach is not working;
- the second is that the revised methodology requires some additional instruments to bring some real change in terms of impact.

Western Balkan countries are progressing too slowly, and EU members states are not much in the mood for enlargement. In this regard, Albania has been facing several challenges in engaging and working in the process.

First, there has been a need for more clarity on how to measure progress and criteria fulfilment. This happened in 2013 and later after 2016 in the Albanian case. In this context, highlighting and focusing on the level of preparedness makes the process of evaluation easier to understand and monitor. However, at the same time, putting too much emphasis on such indicator without providing a very clear explanation on its methodology and how the Commission assigns it could harm credibility and perception of fairness in the process. There is a need for more transparency, on one hand, and for more in-depth unpacking for each chapter, on the other. In order to improve the trust in the evaluation process, the model could elaborate further on how each level of preparedness should be broken into main sub-categories for each negotiating chapter. As an example, since 2016 Albania has undergone a draconian justice reform designed mainly by the EU and US experts. More than half of judges and prosecutors have been expelled by the system. However, trust in the judiciary system has not improved⁶ and, most importantly and in relation to the abovementioned argument, the level of preparedness has not ‘jumped’ as one should expect. Detailing further this indicator could facilitate a fair and transparent evaluation.

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Second, if possible, the model should embrace an attempt to make the process less political and more technical/measurable than it already is. In various occasions Albania has suffered the consequences of individual member states introducing in the Council's conclusions some last-minute priorities or criteria for Albania, even though those were not recognized as issues in the Commission's reports.⁷ While it is always a prerogative of any member state to cast its vote according to their national interest, this continuous change of cards makes the process frustrating and very challenging for candidate countries. In addition, as mentioned, such countries do not have unlimited resources and capacities to monitor closely developments in each member state, get information and address very specific issues before they are brought directly to the Council. The model could envisage a major role for Council structures in this direction from stage I or before, for example, through regular meetings between COELA with Albania's representatives to discuss main concerns. This would also be in line with the overall approach of the model in the different stages: socialisation. The proposed is indeed quite useful in terms of familiarising national representatives with EU formats, even before membership.

⁶ A recent poll conducted in November 2022 by Euronews Albania (Eurobarometer) showed that only 22% of citizens trusts the justice system.

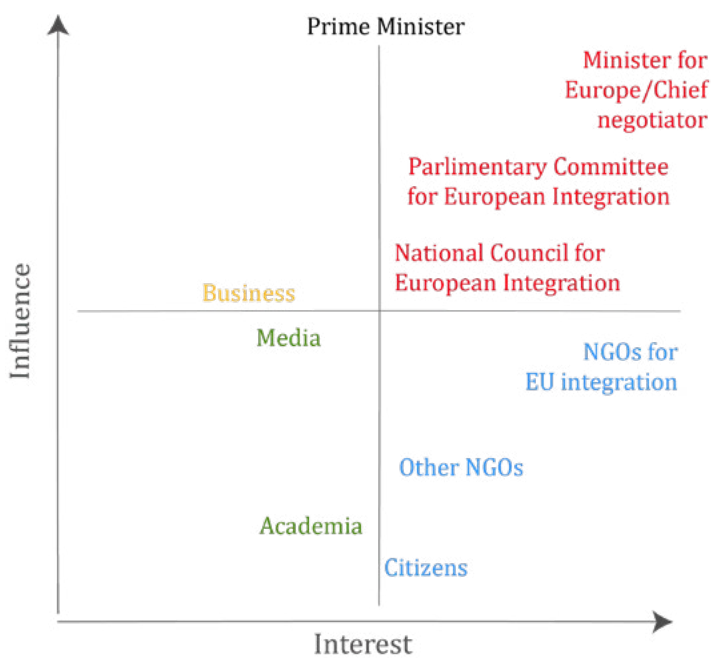
⁷ Gun smuggling in 2014, public procurement procedures in 2015, etc.

Lastly, Albanian leadership has been very eager to propose, promote and endorse new formats of cooperation with the EU. In view of the stagnation in the recent years, the Staged accession model provides a good opportunity for exercising this will and engaging on a more regular basis with EU leaders and institutions once it has reached the required stage/level. After each disappointment received and due to this growing patience fatigue, the Albanian PM has harshened his tones towards EU apathy in enlargement policy.⁸ In addition, on several occasions, he has blamed the EU for the current situation. Although Albania remains strongly anchored in its pro-Western alliance and fully aligned with EU foreign policy, the Staged accession model could soften the above-described attitude and provide a scene for Albanian and regional leaders to get closer to the EU decision-making bodies at a faster pace. Furthermore, elite socialisation is a well-known effective factor from theories of European integration and the practical experience of the EU, which helps to bring countries together and align values and views.

Stakeholder Mapping

Albania is a frontrunner in the region in terms of society's support for EU membership, with 89% in favour.⁹ Consensus is quite broad among stakeholders, and no political parties/groups are assuming sceptical stances towards the EU accession. In this favourable context, paradoxically, it can be even more difficult and challenging to open a discussion on current affairs of the process and how it could be revised and reshaped. However, building the stakeholders' map and discussing their role and specific approaches to the process could help streamlining the efforts towards the Staged accession model operationalisation.

Graph 1. Stakeholder mapping for Albania¹⁰



⁸ PM Rama called the Bulgarian veto “a disgrace” while in Brussels on June 23, 2022.

⁹ Balkan Barometer 2022.

¹⁰ The *influence* reflects the ability of the actor to stop or change the primary direction and approve the model entirely. The more influential they are, the more likely they will have the ability to “make or break” the model. These are actors that affect the model. The *interest* describes the size of overlap between stakeholders’ and the model’s aims – how engaged the stakeholder needs to become vis-à-vis the outcomes of the model. In other words, it should highlight the actor/institution that is expected to have an interest in terms of operationalising the Model (not necessarily presenting whether the stakeholder had already expressed interest or endorsed the model in the past). These are the actors that are affected by the model or whose work would be affected by it.

The Albanian PM has publicly expressed his concerns and disappointment with the current modus operandi of the enlargement policy. This has lowered his interest in engaging properly with the process in the recent years, adopting a pessimistic rhetoric and approach when dealing with the EU.

In the case of Albania, the Prime Minister (office) should be the main actor to approach. Though the country has established other government structures to deal specifically with the process, in the last years almost all decisions regarding its structuring have always taken place at the Prime Minister level. In 2015, an ad hoc inter-ministerial committee for addressing the five key priorities for starting negotiations was established (despite the existing Ministry of European Integration having this mandate). In 2017, the Ministry of European Integration was merged with the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, without previous discussion. In 2018-19, a series of legislative acts for establishing and setting up the negotiating structures were approved. All the proposals and ideas were originated and pushed forward mostly by the PM's office. Last but not least, in 2022 after the start of negotiations, the Prime Minister decided to go back before 2017 and appoint a Minister for Europe (who is at the same time a chief negotiator and uses the premises of the Prime Minister's office).

Considering this vertical approach to managing the process in recent years, any important or relevant proposal and decision to be taken should be addressed directly with the Prime Minister or his close political staff. The Albanian PM might be more open to new ideas and strategies regarding the process (if structured and presented adequately) compared to the other institutional instances. He has showed continuous efforts in exploring and proposing new formats to unblock regional integration¹¹ and promote others at European level¹². In addition, as already mentioned, the Albanian PM has publicly expressed his concerns and disappointment with the current *modus operandi* of the enlargement policy. This has lowered his interest in engaging properly with the process in the recent years, adopting a pessimistic rhetoric and approach when dealing with the EU. However, in terms of influence, he has the highest position in the process, demonstrated also by the previous decision making in this regard.

The Minister for Europe (and Chief Negotiator) would be the other main stakeholder who has a high interest and stake in the overall framework of the process. At present, this institution is represented by a high-level technical/administrative person who has a long experience in public administration and reforms. Although the PM is more of a central figure for strategic decisions, pursuing advocacy with and actively informing the Minister would also be important. Considering also the fact that she is in regular communication and coordination with the PM, it might be a very good indirect influence for engaging in the discussion on the model. This is probably the most interested stakeholder and, since she is the main coordinator, working closely with her could improve the overall advocacy results/outcome in the Albanian institutional framework.

The Parliament is another important actor, mainly through two bodies: the Parliamentary Committee for European Integration and the National Council for European Integration. Since the Parliamentary Committee for European Integration is always chaired by the political opposition, it is quite active in monitoring the government and the negotiating structures. In this regard, its interest in the management framework and patterns of the process is considerably high. In addition, its influence is important, especially in terms of increasing transparency and accountability in the process. Currently, the Committee is reviewing the law on the role of the Parliament in the European integration process. Judging from its proactive approach and involvement, the committee might be a good interlocutor for introducing the model, though it is difficult to predict its approach towards it (majority MPs would probably stick with the PM's opinion).

¹¹ One of the key promoters of the "Open Balkans" initiative.

¹² Strong supporter of the European political community.

On the other hand, the National Council is an inclusive structure which aims at bringing together institutional and non-institutional actors of society for strengthening support for the European integration process. Its members include MPs, civil society organisations, business representatives, academia, etc. The Chief Negotiator also reports periodically to this structure. Though it is only a consultative body, many important debates take place in this forum, and the Council has certain degree of influence in some of the strategic approaches regarding the process. However, making these bodies a main target for advocacy would be very difficult, time-consuming and with uncertain results. They are fragmented¹³ and very prone to engage in more general domestic political debates in their meetings and events. Therefore, the focus and resources for advocacy on the model should be limited with these stakeholders.

Albanian civil society includes several organisations that focus their activities to supporting European integration components. They are quite active and participate in the public debate on the process through projects, publications, media presence, in the national council, etc. Though their direct impact is not high, when it comes to major decisions, their mission is strongly linked to decision making and, therefore, they have a high interest in all main aspects concerning organisation of the accession process. There is a general common agreement among them that enlargement policy has not been working in these last years. However, if not informed properly and not involved in related discussions, the model might face some resistance and criticism from these actors. Though their influence is not high, it is still worth dedicating some efforts in engaging with them in the dissemination phase.

The other society actors have either very low interest in this area, or low influence. They rarely get involved and would not be much interested in getting to know (or having a say regarding) new models for the accession process.

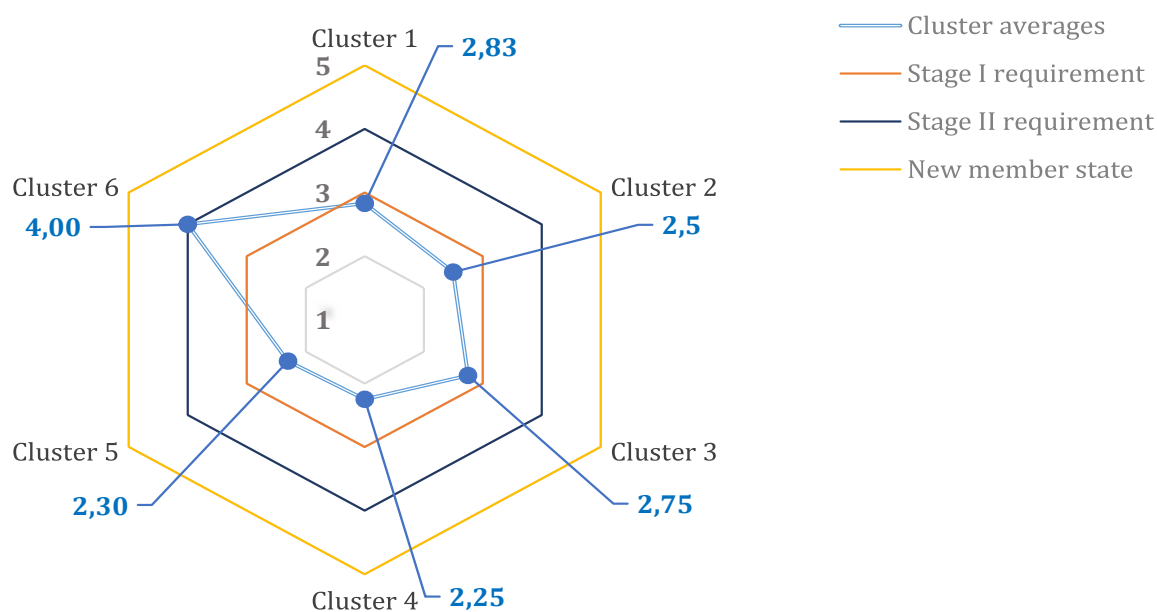
To conclude, the model should be presented and discussed as extensively as possible among the main stakeholders, with the aim of informing and building consensus. However, the main counterpart should be the Prime Minister (office), exploiting the vertical approach of decision making on strategic matters related to the European integration process in the country. There are good chances for positive feedback at this level.

Towards Practical Application

The Staged accession model helps to quantify and then analyse and compare levels of preparedness for each negotiating chapter, which the European Commission assess qualitatively. By assigning indicators from 1 to 5 in accordance with the assessment, the model makes it possible to monitor and discuss the country's readiness to move through the proposed stages.

¹³ The National Council has two co-chairs (majority and opposition) and a diversity of political groups involved which does not allow for in-depth discussions.

Graph 2. Applying the model to Albania



In the case of Albania, based on the 2022 Commission's report, the analysis provides an interesting and diverse picture depending on the cluster. In total, only 17 chapters/criteria (out of the 33 chapters + 3 subareas) are at a moderate level of preparedness. Having explored the current status of each cluster more in detail as shown below, it is fair to conclude that Albania is not ready to access Stage I yet (see Graph 2 and Table 1).

Table 1 European Commission's assessment on the level of preparedness for Albania, based on the 2022 Country Report

Cluster	Rating	
1. Fundamentals	2,83	Some level of preparation / Moderately prepared
2. Internal Market	2,5	Some level of preparation / Moderately prepared
3. Competitiveness and inclusive growth	2,75	Some level of preparation / Moderately prepared
4. Green agenda and sustainable	2,25	Some level of preparation / Moderately prepared
5. Resources, agriculture and cohesion	2,3	Some level of preparation / Moderately prepared
6. External relations	4	Good level of preparation

Reaching Stage I

Cluster 1, the Fundamentals, considered the most important one under the new methodology, has risen closer to the foreseen threshold in the model, necessary to accede Stage I. The cluster average, as showed in graph 1, is 2.83. If unpacked further in terms of the level of preparedness by chapters, most of the work in this cluster should be focused on economic criteria (2.5) and chapters 23 and 24 (2.5, respectively). All the other chapters and criteria have reached the required level of 3 (moderately prepared). Based on the remaining work to be done on chapters 23 and 24, it is possible to expect a level of moderately prepared from next year's report in case genuine incentives are provided.

As for the other clusters, the situation differs between them and within them. With highest number of chapters, **Cluster 2** (Internal market) represents considerable challenge for reaching an average of moderately prepared (3), being 2.5 at present. Five out of nine chapters are already at level 3. However, **chapter 28** represents a major obstacle since it is stuck at an early stage of preparation since 2015 and did not change in 2022. In this regard, to enter stage I, major efforts are required, particularly in this chapter, while the others are at a better level (mostly at 2.5). Though at a better level than chapter 28, the other chapters (1, 2, 7 and 8) require some substantial efforts to jump to level 3. Most of the work required consists of adopting new legislation and aligning with EU standards. The law on copyright (chapter 7) is one of the most difficult elements on the way to level 3 for this chapter and the cluster.

The situation is much better for **Cluster 3** (Competitiveness and inclusive growth). Not only because the average is already at 2.75, but also, when looking closer at the individual chapters, six out of eight are already at the moderately prepared level. In addition, **chapter 25**, which is at some level of preparation, is one of the easiest to be addressed and closed during negotiations. Therefore, in cluster 3, Albania should expect a fairly smooth road towards level 3 and, thus, Stage I of the accession process.

The lowest average out of all clusters is represented by **Cluster 4** (Green agenda and sustainable connectivity). With three chapters on some level of preparation and only one chapter with a moderate level, this should be one of the most difficult clusters to work on for reaching Stage I. Chapters with massive acquis to handle, such as **chapter 14** (transport) and **chapter 27** (environment), will require time and commitment to jump from level 2 to level 3 of preparedness. Fortunately, the energy chapter, another big one, is already at level 3 being moderately prepared.

Cluster 5 (Resources, agriculture and cohesion) also presents a relatively low average, having reached 2.3 in 2022. Most of the chapters in this cluster are at some level of preparation (2), while only **chapter 22** is moderately prepared. In particular, **chapters 11, 12, and 13** will require a considerable amount of work to go from level 2 to level 3, since they cover a vast amount of acquis in agriculture, food safety and fisheries.

As mentioned above, referring to the Staged accession model, Albania is not ready to access Stage I yet. However, it is quite close, and, with some focus on a few pending key issues, it could achieve the average of 3 in all clusters quite soon. Below in Box 1 there is a summary of the necessary efforts to be undertaken, in order to reach such goal.

Last but not least, **Cluster 6** (External relations) is where Albania has been performing best. Historically, the European Commission's reports have always recognised Albania's commitment to aligning with EU foreign policy and its position towards global developments. Being also a NATO member, it is no surprise that the level of preparedness is good, hence, making this cluster ready for Stage II of the Staged accession model.

Box 1. Summary for reaching a moderate level in all clusters (Stage I)

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 1	23	2.5	3.0	- Establish a track record of investigations and prosecutions. - Effectively address the GRECO recommendations. - Ensure legal requirements for transparency of media ownership and financing. - Implement the labour code for the protection of journalists.	Addressing the GRECO recommendations and the labour code for journalists requires moderate efforts and might be sufficient for reaching level 3. On the other hand, legal interventions on transparency for media ownership seems a much sensitive component in political terms.
	24	2.5	3.0	- Implement the asylum law and resume referrals. - Complete the action plan on money laundering. - Finalise the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. - Develop a strategic action plan on anti-informality. - Increase share of spending on education and R&D.	Both remaining challenges for this chapter are highly sensitive for the EU in Albania, hence, substantial work needs to be done for both for advancing to the next level.
	Economic criteria	2.5	3.0	- Finalise the Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan. - Develop a strategic action plan on anti-informality. - Increase share of spending on education and R&D.	In order to reach level 3, designing and elaborating the anti-informality strategic action plan would be the main component for improving the level on economic criteria.

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 2	1	2.5	3.0	- Complete legislation alignment for quality infrastructure. - Strengthen capacities of the Market Surveillance Inspectorate.	Based on repeated EC recommendations, provision of additional resources to the Inspectorate should be a priority for addressing this chapter. Once resources are allocated, this chapter could move to level 3.
	2	2.0	3.0	- Adopt the legislation on the new law on foreigners. - Continue new bilateral agreements on social security.	Bilateral agreements on social security are increasing each year. Efforts should be focused more on the new law on foreigners. Having a draft law might be already a good step towards level 3.
	7	2.5	3.0	- Adopt implementing legislation for law on copyright. - Further align legislation on industrial property rights	Law on copyright remains one of the key recommendations for many years now and should be a priority for improving this chapter's level.
	8	2.5	3.0	- Further align legislation on state aid. - Ensure operational independence of the competitiveness authority.	This chapter is soon to reach level 3. Alignment work for state aid has continued and the increase of financial allocations for the competitiveness authority might be a good strategy for reaching at level 3.
Cluster 2	28	1.0	3.0	- Further align legislation with the EU health acquis on medicines. - Increase allocations of financial and human resources. - Guarantee equal access to vulnerable populations.	Consistent and structured work should be implemented for this chapter to jump by 1 level (at least), especially in aligning legislation. However, current situation remains poor and no major advancement is foreseen for the short-medium term.

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 3	19	2.0	3.0	- Adopt the 2023-2030 strategy for employment and skills. - Increase budget allocation for the Social Fund. - Adopt the action plan and costing of the Youth Guarantee.	Approval of the already designed action plan and the strategy for employment would be the two main components for moving from level 2 to 3. Both are on the way, therefore, Albania could reach this objective in the next 2-3 years.
	25	2.0	3.0	- Increase investment in research. - Complete the Smart Specialisation Strategy. - Produce statistics and reliable data on science and technology.	Budget for research could be increased through more active participation in international calls (maintaining the recent years' trend). While on statistics, it would be sufficient to finish the ongoing work on data collection and elaboration.

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 4	14	2.0	3.0	- Adopt the new National Transport Strategy 2021-2025. - Implement legislation on the railway sector reform.	The National Strategy has already been prepared; therefore, more efforts are needed for the railway sector reform. A new railway project, which is being implemented at present, might provide incentives to speed up the legislative work as well.
	21	2.0	3.0	- Continue developing the core transport and energy network. - Continue to harmonise the legal framework on TEN-T.	Albania has been investing in developing the energy network, therefore, this recommendation could be considered as implemented soon. Legal harmonisation has also started, and new provisions can be included in the national plan.
	27	2.0	3.0	- Adopt the new law on water services. - Adopt the new strategy for water supply and sewerage. - Immediate measures to review and improve environmental and strategic impact of existing and planned projects.	The most urgent element in the environment chapter regards the new law on water services. With the adoption of this legal act, and the finalisation of the new strategy, Albania might get closer to level 3 in the medium term.

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 5	11	2.0	3.0	- Complete the farm register. - Ensure administrative capacities for IPARD III measures. - Complete legal framework on wine quality.	Albania has already done some work on the farm register. Ensuring implementation of the final steps in order to complete it would probably be a great achievement toward level 3. There is additional positive domestic pressure on wine quality, therefore, this could also be completed soon.
	12	2.0	3.0	- Adopt a consolidated national food safety policy. - Align relevant laws on controls, animal and plant health. - Complete the staffing of the veterinary services.	Chapter 12 is among the most difficult ones. In order to get to a moderate level of preparation, some substantial efforts are required in terms of legal alignment and allocation of resources. Both need a more active approach by national institutions and more dedicated resources. This chapter would require the longest time to reach the aimed level.
	13	2.5	3.0	- Build administrative capacity in the fishery sector. - Implement the Regional Plan of Action for small-scale fisheries. - Participate in the GFCM inspection in the Adriatic Sea.	For fisheries, the country is quite close to level 3. The missing steps are mostly related to implementation of the already adopted regional plan and to investing more in human resources.
	33	2.0	3.0	- Continue to align data on National Accounts to ESA 2010. - Align legislation with the EU provisions on VAT. - Enhance administrative capacities and coordination.	Alignment of data and VAT legislation are the necessary components to reach level 3 in chapter 33. However, this would require considerable time and some firm political decisions.

Reaching Stage II

It is worth pointing out that fulfilling all the EC recommendations listed above in the box 1, goes beyond achieving a moderate level of preparation in all clusters. Some of the actions to be taken, if fully implemented, would bring the clusters averages above level 3, and even get closer to the good level of preparation (4). However, when discussing the Albania's possibility to plan the efforts for reaching Stage 2 of the Model, box 1 does not take into consideration the work that needs to be done in all the other (remaining) chapters (where level 3 has already been achieved, but they are still far from level 4). For more details regarding the assessment of the Albanian path towards Stage II of the Model, please see Annex I. The following provides brief overview of the remaining work for Albania to reach this stage.

In this regard, in **Cluster 1** (Fundamentals), chapters 23 and 24 require the biggest efforts. Though Albania has already done some in-depth work on the justice system, it is still missing a few extra miles to reach a moderate level of preparedness. However, chapter 23 might provide an easier path to reach this objective than chapter 24. Challenges in chapter 24 appear to be even more difficult to tackle. In addition, chapter 5 on public procurement also requires some substantial work ahead. The EU has been quite vocal on raising some concerns, especially in the area of public-private partnerships, which are another political matter of high sensitivity. Thus, not only advancement seems difficult, but there is also a chance of reversibility. Meanwhile, for the remaining chapters (18 and 32), reaching level 4 should be fairly smooth sailing in a relatively short period of time.

The EU has been quite vocal on raising some concerns, especially in the area of public-private partnerships, which are another political matter of high sensitivity. Thus, not only advancement seems difficult, but there is also a chance of reversibility.

Cluster 2 (Internal market) presents some moderate challenges in chapter 3, and some more serious ones in chapter 4 for reaching level 4 and allowing Albania to enter Stage II of the Model. **Cluster 3** (Competitiveness and inclusive growth) has the highest number of chapters that require advancement from level 3 to level 4. In terms of assessment for a potential jump to level 4, these chapters can be divided into two groups. The first group is composed of chapters 10, 16, 20 and 29, which present major shortcomings and structural difficulties, leaving very little hope for upgrade to level 4 within a short period of time. The remaining chapters (17 and 26) are quite advanced and reaching a good level of preparation should not be a problem, as things stand. Within **Cluster 4** (Green agenda and sustainable connectivity) only the energy chapter (15) is of concern since it is quite complex and would require substantial efforts for advancing to a good level of preparation. **Cluster 5** (Resources, agriculture and cohesion) presents an optimistic picture only regarding the chapter (22) which is already at level 3. EC Recommendations in this chapter are being implemented at a good pace. Finally, in **Cluster 6** (External relations) Albania is already at a good level of preparation, therefore, fulfilling the criteria for entering Stage II of the Model.

Conclusions

In the context of Albania's path towards EU membership, the Staged accession model could become a useful framework for addressing some of current shortcomings of the process. If structured and promoted adequately, the model would help in filling the existing gaps from the revised methodology and providing new dynamism through its stages. However, there is a need to prepare the ground with respective stakeholders and communicate potential benefits of its implementation.

In terms of the Model's applicability to the Albanian process, at present, the country is not prepared to access Stage I. However, as displayed in this paper, with some well-planned and structured efforts in a few acquis chapters, and with serious domestic commitment, Albania could reach a moderate level of preparation in all clusters in a relatively short period of time. Apart from a few specific cases, in general, there is a smooth path in fulfilling EC recommendations for reaching level 3 of preparation in all remaining chapters. In this regard, the model helps considerably through offering a clear picture on the strategic planning required for accessing the following stage. If coordinated properly at the institutional level, the use of the model would help the country to better organise its efforts and resources, benefiting more from the process and moving even closer to membership.

Regarding stakeholders involved in the process, considering the existing top-down approach with the institutional framework, the Albanian PM (office) would be the main interlocutor for presenting the Model, in cooperation with the Minister for Europe. Other stakeholders of society would be important counterparts for discussing the model and how it can concretely help with streamlining the efforts and optimising energies required for moving forward. Making the stages and their benefits as practical and as tangible as possible, would increase the stakeholders' interest and would revive the weakened credibility of the process.

Annex I Summary for reaching a good level of preparation in all clusters (Stage II)

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 1	5	3.0	4.0	- Monitor the implementation of the new procurement law. - Legislative alignment in the area of concessions and public-private partnerships. - Ensure compliance of the agreements made with third parties with the <i>acquis</i>.	Monitoring instruments to be approved. Public-private partnerships are a highly sensitive topic and a concern for the EU. Advancement in this chapter onto level 4 will rely considerably on solving this issue.
	18	3.0	4.0	- Implement the Population and Housing census 2023. - Improve overall capacities for statistics.	- Implement the Population and Housing census 2023. - Improve overall capacities for statistics.
	32	3.0	4.0	- Implement instructions on financial delegation of responsibilities.	Both recommendations do not require major efforts, but rather smoother coordination between institutions, which can be addressed in one or two years.
	Political criteria ¹⁴	3.13	4.0	- Follow-up on OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. - Need to enhance communication, coordination, and expertise within the administration regarding accession negotiations. - Implementation of the new Law on registration of Non-Profit Organisations. - Implementation of the roadmap on an enabling environment for civil society. - Increase financial resources and administrative capacities of Local Government Units.	Since the electoral reform is highly sensitive and a matter of intense political debate, most of energies and efforts could be focused on improving the civil society framework for proper inclusion in the policy processes. In addition, increase of capacities at central and local level is another component that could be addressed for reaching at level 4.

¹⁴ Since the European Commission has not assigned a level of preparedness to the functioning of democratic institutions, the team working on the model has used indicators from [FH Nations in Transit](#) to measure the level – these include National Democratic Governance, Electoral Process, Civil Society, and Local Democratic Governance. Components which are already covered in other chapters have not been considered for the calculation. Since the scores of the Freedom House report are presented on a scale of 1-7, the mean score for the political criteria area was calculated

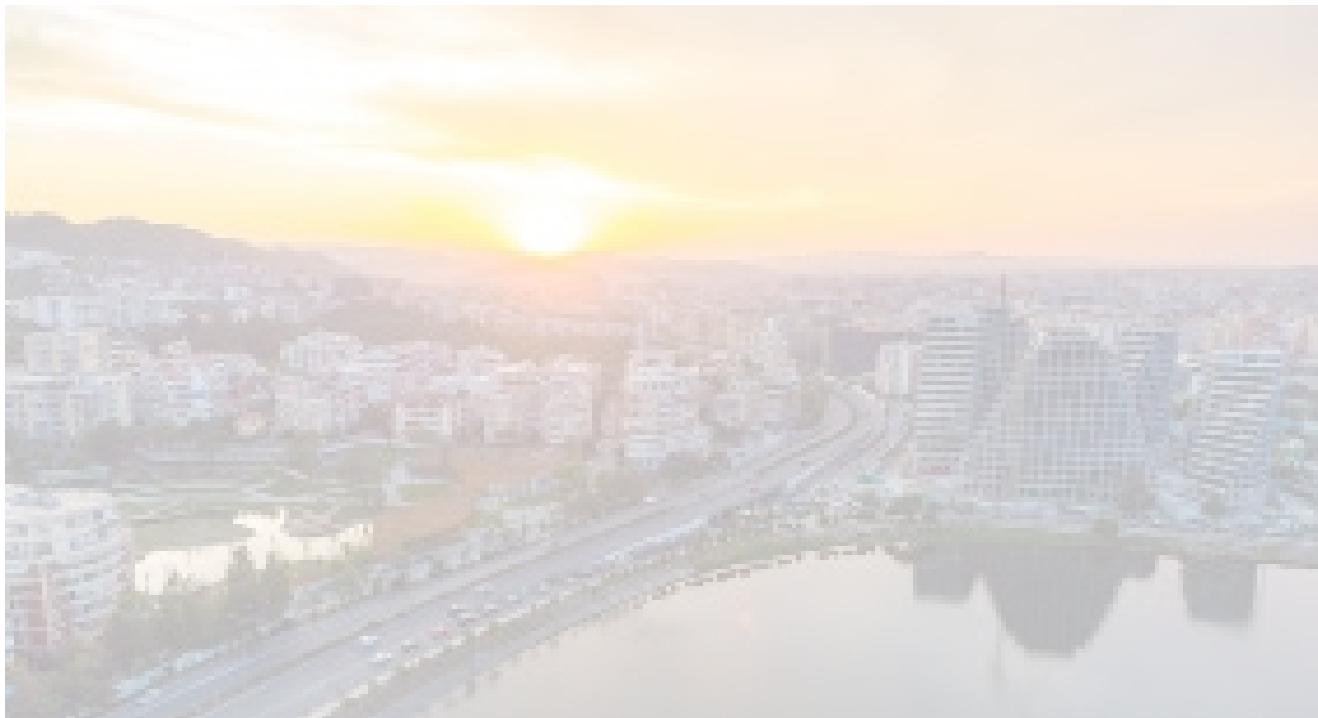
Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 1	Public Administration Reform	3.0	4.0	- Increase the capacities for policy planning and monitoring - Prepare new public administration and public financial management strategies - Effectively implement provisions on merit-based recruitment in the civil service law	The first two recommendations have the potential of being fulfilled relatively early. Albania is being supported through technical assistance in the area of policy planning and public finance management and work is ongoing. Addressing these two items might bring this area closer to a good level of preparedness.
Cluster 2	3	3.0	4.0	- Finalise screening to identify barriers - Legislative alignment and institutional capacities for mutual recognition of professional qualifications	Albania has already done the pre-screening and the working group is engaged for identifying barriers. In addition, a roadmap has been drafted for addressing the issue of mutual recognition of professional qualifications. Therefore, in the next two to four years, these necessary steps might have advanced, bringing the chapter towards level 4.
	4	3.0	4.0	- Address Moneyval recommendations - Do not adopt the plan for tax and criminal amnesty - Adopt legislation to allow foreigners to acquire land	The first two recommendations are of a high political sensitivity, since there is an ongoing debate between Albanian government and the EU. A change in political positioning would be required, especially regarding the amnesty plan. The last recommendation is pending since 2016 and requires some legislative interventions. To achieve level 4, this chapter would require strong political commitment and will.
	6	3.0	4.0	- Identify amendments needed for aligning company law - Further align with EU acquis on accounting, transparency and audit	The reviewing process has already started. This is mostly technical work which requires substantial efforts by the relative working group.

by adjusting the scores to a scale of 1-5 using the following formula: $x5 = (x7 - 1)(4/6) + 1$

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 2	9	3.0	4.0	- Finalise and adopt draft on financial education - Improve collateral execution - Increase the use of national currency	Solving the impasse on private bailiff services is a key element pending for a few years, which would also deliver on the second recommendation. On the use of national currency (instead of the Euro), the Bank of Albania is implementing a structured plan which is slowly producing results.
Cluster 3	10	3.0	4.0	- Extend the 112 emergency to 12 additional regions - Align with the new European Electronic Communications Code - Improve data collection on digital performance and competitiveness	On all three recommendations there is some initial work in progress. However, reaching at level 4 would require some major advancement in this area.
	16	3.0	4.0	- Measures to reduce tax expenditures - Simplify the taxation system - Increase capacities for automatic exchange of tax information with EU MS	Unfortunately, Albania is going in the opposite direction in some areas of this chapter. Taxation system keeps changing several times (almost each year), and not getting simpler. The EC recommendations would not require major efforts, but substantial changes in governance approach would be needed.

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 3	17	3.0	4.0	- Align legislation on the personal independence of Bank of Albania's governor and the board - Improve planning capacities and consultation with non-governmental stakeholders	Chapter 17 could reach level 4 with relatively small efforts, since both recommendations do not present major obstacles.
	20	3.0	4.0	- Address the list of challenges for improving business environment - Accelerate alignment with EU acquis on late payments - Adopt the unified investment law in accordance with ERP of 2022-2024	Reaching level 4 in chapter 20 would be quite difficult. Business environment needs to be improved by working on the regulatory burden, on tackling informality, and implementing law on start-ups (which has now been adopted). Alignment with late payments acquis is another difficult task. Therefore, work for this chapter might require a few years.
	26	3.0	4.0	- Improve the VET system in line with needs of labour market - Professional development and training of teachers - Adopt the 2022-2029 National Youth Strategy	All three recommendations are quite advanced in fulfilment. There is extensive work being done on the VET system and training of teachers is being assisted by some new programmes. On the other hand, the National Youth Strategy has been adopted. Reaching level 4 should not be too difficult if the current pace is maintained.
	29	3.0	4.0	- Approve legal provisions for the New Computerised Transit System - Increase fight against smuggling, corruption, etc. - Accede FCTC protocol to eliminate illicit trade of tobacco products	Improving customs management and performance is a major component, which will require more tangible efforts for reaching level 4 (not feasible soon).

Cluster	Chapter	Current	Required	Actions to be taken	Key assessment
Cluster 4	15	3.0	4.0	- Ensure that Power Exchange (ALPEX) is fully operational - Ensure full access to energy operators to liberalised market - Implement the National Energy and Climate Plan 2020-2030	The energy sector is developing quite rapidly in Albania. However, based also on EC recommendations, some structural aspects regarding management and planning are needed. These imply a few firm political decisions.
Cluster 5	22	3.0	4.0	- Prepare for the effective implementation of the EU acquis under chapter 22 - Finalise and approve the National Strategy for Development and Integration (2020-2030) - Proceed with national strategy and plan for regional development and cohesion (2021-2027) - Clarify responsibilities between local and central institutions in line with the decentralisation agenda	Work on chapter 22 has advanced quite well since the last report. There is substantial advancement in all recommendations, including the approval of the national strategy. Preparation of local governments and building their capacities is a key challenge that requires extra attention, if Albania wants to reach level 4 for this chapter.



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The **National Issue Paper Series** was developed within the project “**Support for further development of the model of the Western Balkans staged accession to the European Union**” implemented by the **European Policy Centre (CEP – Belgrade)** and the **Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS – Brussels)**. The essence of the Project has been to focus on operationalising the **Staged accession model**, co-designed by CEP Belgrade and CEPS Brussels. In order to achieve the set goal, the Project has been supporting the research and analysis needed to develop a series of 14 issue papers. **Six national issue papers** have been created on potential application of the Staged accession model in each of the Western Balkan countries, with a focus on the political and economic specificities of each WB country, the potential implementation dynamics at national level, the stakeholder analysis, as well as the analysis of opportunities and risks that should be considered in the context of the potential model application.

The national issue paper series will directly contribute to the full elaboration of the **Staged Accession Model 2.0** and showcase its application in practice in all the countries in the region.

The core project team has also counted on the valuable expertise of **prominent regional researchers**, as well as individual members of the **Think for Europe Network (TEN)**, such as the **European Policy Institute (EPI – Skopje)**, **Institute Alternative (IA – Podgorica)**, and **Foreign Policy Initiative Bosnia and Herzegovina (FPI BH – Sarajevo)**.

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