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on the 2021 Commission Report on Albania
(2021/2244(INI))

Committee on Foreign Affairs

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MOTION FOR A EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

on the 2021 Commission Report on Albania (2021/2244(INI))

The European Parliament,

- having regard to the Stabilisation and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and the Republic of Albania, of the other part¹,
- having regard to Albania's application for membership of the European Union, submitted on 24 April 2009,
- having regard to Regulation (EU) 2021/1529 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 September 2021 establishing the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA III)²,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 19-20 June 2003 and the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 26-27 June 2014, which included a decision to grant the status of candidate country for EU membership to Albania,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 28 June 2018,
- having regard to the European Council conclusions of 17-18 October 2019,
- having regard to the Council conclusions of 18 June 2019, 25 March 2020 and 14 December 2021 on the enlargement and stabilisation and association process,
- having regard to the Commission communication of 5 February 2020 entitled 'Enhancing the accession process – A credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans' (COM(2020)0057),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 29 April 2020 entitled 'Support to the Western Balkans in tackling COVID-19 and the post-pandemic recovery' (COM(2020)0315),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 24 July 2020 entitled '2020-2025 EU action plan on firearms trafficking' (COM(2020)0608),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 6 October 2020 entitled 'An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans' (COM(2020)0641),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 14 April 2021 on the EU strategy

¹ OJ L 107, 28.4.2009, p. 166.

² OJ L 330, 20.9.2021, p. 1.

- to tackle organised crime 2021-2025 (COM(2021)0170),
- having regard to the Commission communication of 19 October 2021 entitled ‘2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy’ (COM(2021)0644), accompanied by the Commission staff working document entitled ‘Albania 2021 Report’ (SWD(2021)0289),
 - having regard to the Council of Europe Convention on Laundering, Search, Seizure and Confiscation of the Proceeds from Crime and on the Financing of Terrorism,
 - having regard to the Council of Europe’s report of November 2021 entitled ‘Beyond Definitions: a call for action against hate speech in Albania – a comprehensive study’,
 - having regard to the final report of 26 July 2021 by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Election Observation Mission on the Republic of Albania’s parliamentary elections of 25 April 2021,
 - having regard to the Venice Commission’s opinion of 14 December 2021 on the extension of the term of office of the transitional bodies in charge of the re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors,
 - having regard to the Joint Opinion of the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR of 11 December 2020 on the amendments of 30 July 2020 to the Albanian Constitution and of 5 October 2020 to the Electoral Code,
 - having regard to all other opinions of the Venice Commission on Albania,
 - having regard to the Sofia Summit of 10 November 2020, including the Declaration on the Common Regional Market and the Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans,
 - having regard to the Sofia Declaration of the EU-Western Balkans summit of 17 May 2018 and the Sofia priority agenda,
 - having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summit, held in Zagreb on 6 May 2020, and its declaration,
 - having regard to the EU-Western Balkans summit, held in Brdo pri Kranju on 6 October 2021, and its declaration,
 - having regard to the 8th Berlin Process Summit of 5 July 2021,
 - having regard to the EU-Western Balkans Ministerial Forum on Justice and Home Affairs held in Brdo pri Kranju on 1-3 December 2021 and its joint press statement,
 - having regard to the final declaration of the 8th Western Balkans Civil Society Forum dated 1 October 2021,
 - having regard to special report 01/2022 of the European Court of Auditors of

10 January 2022 entitled ‘EU support for the Rule of Law in the Western Balkans: despite efforts, fundamental problems persist’,

- having regard to its resolution of 24 October 2019 on opening accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania³,
 - having regard to its recommendation of 19 June 2020 to the Council, the Commission and the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy on the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit⁴,
 - having regard to its resolution of 25 November 2020 on strengthening media freedom: the protection of journalists in Europe, hate speech, disinformation and the role of platforms⁵,
 - having regard to its resolution of 15 December 2021 on cooperation on the fight against organised crime in the Western Balkans⁶,
 - having regard to its resolution of 9 March 2022 on foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union, including disinformation⁷,
 - having regard to its previous resolutions on Albania,
 - having regard to Rule 54 of its Rules of Procedure,
 - having regard to the report of the Committee on Foreign Affairs (A9-0131/2022),
- A. whereas enlargement is one of the EU’s most effective foreign policy instruments, as it contributes to extending the reach of the Union’s fundamental values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law, peace building and respect for human rights and dignity;
- B. whereas European integration represents the aspirations of Albanian citizens towards democracy and prosperity and serves as a powerful catalyst for reforms that would improve the functioning of state institutions and quality of life;
- C. whereas the prospect of Albania’s merit-based membership is in the Union’s own political, security and economic interests;
- D. whereas Albania has been a candidate country since 2014 and the Commission has been recommending starting accession talks since 2018 and finally submitted a draft negotiating framework for Albania on 1 July 2020;
- E. whereas the EU must provide a clear and reliable pathway for countries seeking to join the EU; whereas the quality of a country’s necessary reforms should determine the timetable for accession; whereas Albania has increased its efforts and delivered tangible

³ OJ C 202, 28.5.2021, p. 86.

⁴ OJ C 362, 8.9.2021, p. 129.

⁵ OJ C 425, 20.10.2021, p. 28.

⁶ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2021)0506.

⁷ Texts adopted, P9_TA(2022)0064.

and sustainable results on key areas identified by the Council as necessary for the adoption of the negotiating framework ahead of the first intergovernmental conference;

- F. whereas Albania must continue to press forward with the consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and human rights, including the protection of persons belonging to minorities, along with the fight against corruption as key benchmarks for assessing progress towards EU accession;
 - G. whereas the EU remains fully committed to supporting Albania's strategic choice on EU integration, based on good neighbourly relations, and continues to be by far Albania's biggest trade and investment partner and its largest provider of financial assistance whereas the country has benefited from EUR 1.24 billion in EU pre-accession funding under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA) I and IPA II since 2007;
 - H. whereas the EU has shown its commitment to the European perspective of Western Balkan countries and mobilised EUR 3.3 billion to address the immediate health crisis and mitigate the economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic;
 - I. whereas malign foreign direct and proxy interference and disinformation aim to sow discord, violence and inter-ethnic tensions and to destabilise the whole region;
 - J. whereas Albania remains an important geopolitical ally and a trustworthy foreign policy partner, in full alignment with the common foreign and security policy and with its efforts to advance regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations;
 - K. whereas Albania joined the EU's efforts in supporting Ukraine by sanctioning Russia, aligning with the votes of the EU Member States in the UN General Assembly and working in its capacity as a member of the UN Security Council;
 - L. whereas Albania has made sustained efforts in fulfilling all the conditions for the scheduling of the first Intergovernmental Conference, as already affirmed in Parliament's report on the 2019-2020 Commission report on Albania, and is advancing in its accession process;
 - M. whereas Albanian citizens have enjoyed visa-free travel to the Schengen area since December 2010 and have been able to participate in student, academic and youth exchanges under the Erasmus+ programme since 2015;
1. Reiterates its clear support for Albania's democratic transformation, underpinned by its strategic orientation and unwavering commitment to European integration, along with good neighbourly relations and inclusive regional cooperation; reaffirms the European future of Albania and the whole Western Balkans region;
 2. Regrets the failure to open long overdue accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia; emphasises its full solidarity and sympathies with the countries' citizens and considers this failure, which undermines public attitude towards the EU, a serious danger to the EU's enlargement policy as a whole, damaging the EU's reputation as a reliable partner and serious geopolitical actor;

3. Urges the Council to uphold the credibility of European integration by promptly opening accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, as continuously recommended by the Commission, given that both countries have fulfilled the conditions set by the European Council and continue to deliver sustained results across fundamental areas; calls on the Member States to demonstrate full political commitment towards the enlargement and give a credible impetus for reform efforts in other enlargement countries by opening the accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia;
4. Recognises the transformative nature of the accession negotiations to be conducted under the revised enlargement methodology within a broader geo-strategic context, including malicious activities seeking to undermine deeper EU integration of the Western Balkans and the stability of the Western Balkan countries;
5. Recalls that Albania's final EU accession depends on lasting, in-depth and irreversible reforms across fundamental areas, starting with the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions; underscores that the pace of its merit-based EU accession should be determined by the progress on the due functioning of all institutions and is grounded in the rule of law, good governance and fundamental rights; urges Albania to sustain and intensify efforts to reinforce the functioning of the judiciary, strengthen democracy, the rule of law and the economy, empower civil society, counter corruption and organised crime, ensure media freedom and guarantee the protection of minority rights, including the LGBTI+ community; recalls that candidate countries undergo in-depth transformations to fulfil membership criteria during accession negotiations, which last as long as needed to implement the necessary reforms;

Democratic institutions, media and civil society

6. Reaffirms the joint responsibility of Albania's political forces to strengthen constructive political dialogue and cooperation, enabling an effective functioning of the country's democratic institutions by continuing to improve governance, transparency and pluralism and by enabling the active participation of civil society; expresses its serious concern about the polarised political climate and lack of sustainable cross-party cooperation that continue to hamper the democratic process; recalls the importance of building the necessary consensus between all political actors to strengthen Albania's democratic parliamentary culture, constructive parliamentary tradition, trust and a true inter-party dialogue; encourages the use of the Jean Monnet Dialogue in this regard;
7. Welcomes all efforts made to reduce polarisation prior to the 2021 general elections, which brought the opposition parties back into the political process in parliament; regrets the non-consensual changes of the constitution and electoral law by the ruling majority before the general elections; invites Albania's political parties to show political maturity in treating matters of public interest and to enhance competitive intra-party democracy and integrity as a stepping-stone for pluralism and democratic transformation;
8. Recalls the need to address the remaining electoral shortcomings in line with the OSCE/ODIHR and Venice Commission recommendations in due time before the next

general election, by further improving the accessibility and integrity of elections and preventing vote-buying and the misuse of administrative resources, including through digitalisation, transparency, data protection, equitable access to media, as well as revised legislation and rules on political party financing and functioning; notes that despite these shortcomings and problems, the 2021 parliamentary elections were generally well organised and competitive; regrets the lack of final convictions in high-level vote-buying cases; proposes sending an EU Election Observation Mission to Albania ahead of the next parliamentary elections;

9. Expresses concern over enduring inflammatory rhetoric, including by high-level politicians, public officials and other public figures, which fuels the culture of intimidation, smear campaigns, violence and rioting; urges political actors to lead by example in advancing societal dialogue and calls for the final convictions of those who attack journalists to be ensured;
10. Underscores the need to step up the involvement of the Albanian Parliament (Kuvendi) in the EU integration process to further advance its legislative, oversight and budgetary abilities; urges the Kuvendi to advance progress on electoral and territorial reforms and welcomes the establishment of the relevant parliamentary committees;
11. Encourages the government to accelerate administrative preparations for the upcoming accession negotiations and to make the best use of the relevant assistance and know-how provided by EU Member States; stresses the importance of having in place coherent and efficient government structures to effectively coordinate EU integration matters involving civil society and relevant stakeholders, while ensuring transparency towards the general public;
12. Underlines the need to improve intra-service coordination, evaluation and monitoring of EU-related reforms, to advance decentralisation, country-wide modernisation and depoliticisation of the civil service and to enable conditions to conduct the upcoming population census in line with international standards on transparency and confidentiality, so that all national minorities can be counted accurately, without fear of intimidation; reiterates the need to further consolidate the territorial administrative reform as part of the wider decentralisation agenda in order to guarantee local fiscal autonomy and empower municipalities to provide high-quality public services;
13. Recalls the responsibility of national and local authorities to improve transparency, accountability and inclusiveness by conducting anticipatory, meaningful and regular public stakeholder consultations and strengthening the ability of the National Council for Civil Society to voice the priorities of civil society organisations; calls for the establishment of proper public consultations and dialogue with the public, including youth and minorities, covering, among others, environmental issues and reconstruction and urbanisation projects; underlines the need to enhance participatory democracy, including by adopting a balanced referendum law; urges the authorities to ensure adequate funding for and the effective and impartial functioning of independent bodies and agencies and the consistent implementation of their decisions and recommendations;
14. Reiterates the need to foster the culture of accountability, non-partisan access to public

information and scrutiny of public institutions, in particular through an enabling fiscal and security environment and cooperation with the media and the civil society; calls for further tangible progress in improving the legal and financial sustainability and self-regulation of the non-governmental and media sectors, including online media;

15. Notes the need for urgent improvement on freedom of expression, media independence and pluralism and is concerned with the absence of progress in this area, as Albania has fallen eight places in the Reporters Without Borders 'World Press Freedom Index' since 2018;
16. Requests that authorities implement a zero tolerance policy and take decisive action against the marginalisation and intimidation of and violence against independent media outlets and reporters, by taking action against strategic lawsuits against public participation, smear campaigns and indirect political and financial pressure that seriously stifle media freedom, induce self-censorship and gravely undermine efforts to uncover crime and corruption and report independently; urges political figures to stop verbal attacks, smear campaigns and acts of intimidation, such as defamation lawsuits targeting journalists, that aim to undermine or discredit the importance of journalism and media independence;
17. Repeats its calls to improve the working conditions of journalists by strengthening the protection of Albanian journalists' labour and social rights, and to adopt regulations enhancing transparency on and public disclosure of media ownership, sources of funding and public advertising;
18. Recalls that any revision of media laws by the Kuvendi should be in line with the Venice Commission recommendations and should take place in a transparent and inclusive manner, in consultation with media organisations, with the aim of improving media freedom and self-regulation and reducing media concentration, misuse, outside interference and self-censorship; reiterates its grave concerns about the previously proposed 'anti-defamation package' and welcomes that the Kuvendi has initiated a process to review the current laws regarding the anti-defamation framework;
19. Recalls the need to strengthen investigative journalism, fact-checking and media literacy as means to tackle hate speech, disinformation and fake news; encourages support for a self-regulatory mechanism for media and stresses the need to ensure an impartial regulatory functioning of the Audiovisual Media Authority; calls for a reform of the public service broadcaster to enhance its editorial and financial independence, impartiality and professionalism;
20. Underlines that the newly established Media and Information Agency should increase transparency and decentralisation and must in no way inhibit journalists' equal access to information from government sources; calls on the government to improve access to the reporting and scrutinising of its work via official and formal channels, such as press conferences and interviews;
21. Calls on the European External Action Service and the Commission to improve coordination and address disinformation and hybrid threats that seek to undermine the EU perspective by more strategically underscoring the EU's relevance to people in the Western Balkans;

Fundamental rights

22. Urges the relevant bodies to systematically and proactively prevent, swiftly and thoroughly investigate and prosecute all instances of offline and online hate speech, hate crimes, verbal and physical attacks and intimidation, including against journalists, human rights defenders and people belonging to vulnerable and minority groups, such as LGBTI+ or Roma people, to ensure their safety and security; encourages the office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination to be more proactive in combating discriminatory hate speech, in particular against LGBTI+ persons, and to develop disaggregated data collection on the matter; encourages the government to consider defining hate speech in its criminal code;
23. Welcomes advances in ensuring equal opportunities and calls for further improvements in the enforcement of gender equality, property rights, data protection, rights of people with disabilities and minority rights in the fields of education, languages, self-identification and the protection of cultural heritage; calls on the authorities to ensure equal treatment for LGBTI+ and Roma minorities and tackle the intersectional discrimination that these groups face through a systemic and effective institutional approach; welcomes the adoption of the by-law on minority education and calls on the government to swiftly adopt the remaining implementing legislation relating to the 2017 framework law on the protection of national minorities, including as regards self-identification and the use of minority languages; urges the authorities to ensure non-discriminatory access to education and calls on Albania to ensure the effective protection of the property rights and cultural heritage of all ethnic and national minorities and that minority groups have equal opportunities and adequate representation in political and cultural life, public media, administration and the judiciary;
24. Calls for further efforts to ensure and protect the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, who were among the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic; deplores that during the April 2021 elections, persons with disabilities encountered barriers to vote; calls for further efforts to address violence against persons with disabilities, improve overall accessibility (including services and information), and promote employment; points out that the quality of education for disabled children, especially deaf children, remains a cause for concern; notes that Albania has not ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
25. Considers that the reported doubling of HIV infections since last year is highly concerning; recalls that the national strategy for people living with HIV expired in 2020; calls on the government to take appropriate measures, in liaison with civil society, to address the rising numbers of HIV infections and ensure access to healthcare for those most vulnerable;
26. Commends the adoption of the new 2021-2027 LGBTI+ national action plan and encourages its full implementation and proper budgeting via a coordination and monitoring body that would oversee it; recalls the need to eradicate prevalent discrimination, aggression and hate speech and ensure equal rights for LGBTI+ persons, especially regarding access to healthcare, education, justice, employment and housing;

27. Calls on Albania to fully implement the Venice Commission recommendations by advancing a comprehensive land sector reform through a transparent consolidation of property registration and compensation;
28. Expresses serious concern about the massive leaks of personal data; calls on the Albanian authorities to enhance prevention, ensure accountability for data misuse and speed up alignment with EU personal data protection rules;
29. Acknowledges the progress achieved in implementing the Istanbul Convention; calls on authorities to step up the prevention of and responses to gender-based violence and femicide, to enhance financial, reintegration and legal support for survivors and increase funding to relevant women's non-governmental organisations; underlines the need to advance the prosecution of cases of harassment, domestic violence and violence against children, including through increasing the number of properly trained gender-sensitive law enforcement officers and judges; urges authorities to take action against all sexual abuses, particularly of children, especially extremely vulnerable refugee and migrant children and children with disabilities, as a majority of all sexual abuse cases in Albania are committed against girls; also urges authorities to strengthen the system for monitoring and combating child labour and other forms of exploitation; notes that the representation of women in public offices needs further improvement;
30. Recalls the need to effectively ensure the right to freedom of peaceful assembly without arbitrary or discriminatory measures and notes the importance of addressing allegations of police misconduct and investigating and prosecuting disproportionate uses of force; expresses support for the independent vetting of high-ranking police officers and suggests that Albania consider introducing regular integrity checks of police officers; calls for advances in the penitentiary reform to further improve prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners in line with the recommendations of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; recalls the need to address communist-era crimes, investigate enforced disappearances, prosecute those responsible and provide reparations to survivors and their families;
31. Welcomes Albania's long-standing proven commitment to hosting refugees; recalls the authorities' obligation to ensure due asylum process and to address the needs of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants; calls for the EU to boost its support for humanitarian assistance and migration management in the region; welcomes Albania's decision on the temporary hosting of Afghan and Ukrainian citizens seeking refuge after leaving their countries;

Rule of law

32. Underlines that the rule of law and judicial reforms are the backbone of a democratic transformation and ensure legal certainty, transparency, access to justice and non-discrimination; urges the Commission to implement the recommendations of special report 01/2022 of the European Court of Auditors, ensuring that EU funding advances the rule of law in the Western Balkans, including in Albania;
33. Emphasises the obligation of Albanian authorities to continue eliminating corruption and criminal activities from all domains of public life, including public procurement procedures and political party financing; notes that Albania has fallen 27 places on the

Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index for 2021, since 2016; expresses concern over the weakened oversight and accountability for public procurement and foreign aid spending during the pandemic and urges a swift remedy for the deficiencies;

34. Commends the steady progress in implementing a comprehensive justice reform, underpinned by the strengthened legislative framework and the unprecedented vetting process, which have continued to deliver tangible results; welcomes the cross-party support enabling the Kuvendi's decision to extend the vetting bodies' mandate until 31 December 2024 and urges all sides to accelerate the completion of the vetting process; underlines the need to take necessary measures to eliminate side-effects of the vetting, such as lengthy proceedings, a low clearance rate and a high backlog of cases; welcomes a restored functionality of Constitutional Court and the High Court, which should improve citizens' access to justice and speed up judicial proceedings;
35. Recalls the paramount importance of further advancing and consolidating the capacity of the judicial system to enable an irreversible shift towards accountable, independent and functional judicial and governance institutions; stresses the need to ensure adequate financial, technical and human resources, as well as the financial and operational independence of judicial and law enforcement institutions; welcomes the progress in improving the professionalism, impartiality and accountability of the judiciary, which is aimed at ensuring its independence from undue influence and resolving the mounting backlog of cases; recalls the obligation to guarantee an effective operation of judicial self-governing bodies;
36. Welcomes the work of the Specialised Structure for Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime including its Courts, in tackling corruption and organised crime; notes that additional efforts are needed to further increase the seizure and confiscation of criminal assets stemming from corruption-related offences and to develop a track record in high-level cases; deplores that convictions in cases involving high-level officials still remain limited, which fosters a culture of impunity;
37. Welcomes the adoption of 10 laws aiming to further strengthen the efficiency of the judicial system and underlines the importance of additional measures such as the implementation of the judicial map, a new integrated case management system and a strengthened legal education system; highlights that the court system reform under the new judiciary map should take into consideration stakeholders' opinions and the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable groups and improve access to justice and due legal process;
38. Underlines the importance of taking decisive action against money laundering and terrorist financing by ensuring a consistent track record of proactive investigation, prosecution and final convictions for high-level corruption and confiscation of criminal assets; encourages the swift remedy of deficiencies in addressing the Financial Action Task Force action plan and the 'Moneyval recommendations' and fully implementing the recently amended legislation aligning with the relevant EU rules;
39. Recalls an immense potential of digitalisation for serving justice and eradicating criminal activities and conflicts of interest through asset and interest disclosure and

verification; calls on the government to implement measures to reduce informality, where possible;

40. Encourages Albania to refrain from establishing a citizenship-by-investment scheme, which could pose serious security, money laundering, corruption and tax evasion risks;
41. Welcomes the renewed constructive US engagement in the Western Balkans, including its focus on the fight against corruption; highlights, in this context, the US executive order sanctioning persons contributing to the destabilising situation in the Western Balkans, as well as the US action targeting individuals and entities for their significant acts of corruption; calls for the EU to thoroughly assess a possible alignment with such actions;
42. Welcomes the ongoing efforts that should lead to systemic improvements in tackling organised crime, including the trafficking of humans, drugs, firearms and cultural and other goods, along with cybercrime, violent crime, extremism and terrorist threats; commends the ongoing bilateral, regional and international cooperation on dismantling transnational crime networks, including with the EU Justice and Home Affairs agencies, such as Europol, Eurojust and Frontex, covering the intensified action against the production and organised trafficking of drugs, illegal weapons and people;
43. Highlights that Albania is the only country in the region that has signed cooperation agreements with all Justice and Home Affairs agencies of the EU and that the first fully fledged joint operation with the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) outside the EU was deployed at the Greek-Albanian border in May 2019; commends that Albania has allowed air monitoring by EU Member State law enforcement services to detect the production of narcotics; recommends that Albania update the legislation regarding drug precursors;
44. Expresses concern over the wide prevalence of firearms in Albania; stresses the need to improve standard procedures and mechanisms to counter the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons and to step up the investigation and prosecution of their trafficking;
45. Underlines the crucial contribution of Albania to the management of the Union's external border and the prevention of cross-border crime, which must continue to be a priority and must be conducted in full respect for the fundamental rights enshrined in applicable international and regional laws and principles;
46. Notes that the Western Balkan countries remain a migratory transit route and that the large movements of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants pose a challenge to the region and EU Member States; notes that Albania has continued to experience a growing number of arrivals of mostly transiting irregular migrants; calls for enhanced efforts in protecting vulnerable migrants, including by addressing the smuggling of people, in particular unaccompanied minors; notes the continued reduction of unfounded asylum claims by Albanian nationals, which still require further efforts from the Albanian authorities and notes the fulfilment of visa liberalisation benchmarks;

Socioeconomic reforms

47. Highlights EU funding of sustainable post-earthquake and post-pandemic recovery and

supports the ongoing efforts towards Albania's democratic, green and digital transformation; welcomes EU support for reconstruction, including the rebuilding of schools and kindergartens and cultural heritage sites following the Together4Albania Donors' Conference in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of November 2019; underlines the need to step up EU assistance and funding for rule of law improvements and encourage sustainable green growth, biodiversity, innovation, competitiveness, property rights and reversal of the demographic decline;

48. Underlines that the simplification and modernisation of the tax system and improved tax collection would facilitate the management of public spending and the deficit in the face of rising energy and food prices;
49. Stresses that improved governance, transparency, legal certainty, inclusion and social dialogue are essential for stimulating foreign direct investment and the retention of skilled workers; calls for a meaningful inclusion of civil society and other relevant stakeholders in the debate over policy actions;
50. Underlines the importance of empowering the youth and welcomes the designation of Tirana as the 2022 European Youth Capital; stresses the significance of the programme for the Western Balkans as an opportunity to foster the values of European integration and good neighbourly relations among youth from all over Europe, while promoting cultural and linguistic diversity;
51. Encourages the Albanian authorities to reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion by improving access to social, education and healthcare services, especially for disadvantaged populations such as Roma and Egyptian communities, minority groups, people with disabilities and the poor; urges the setting of a minimum standard of living, as a means to reduce the risk of poverty; regrets that the 2021 budget allocation for education was only 2.7 % of Albania's GDP; calls for increased investment in the modernisation of the education system to ensure its quality and inclusiveness;
52. Urges Albania to increase efforts aimed at gender equality and women's rights, including by prioritising gender mainstreaming and increased cooperation with civil society, in particular women's organisations; calls on lawmakers in Albania to take steps to ensure an adequate representation of women in all decision-making positions, and to further address the lack of implementation of women workers' rights, gender stereotyping, gender imbalance and the gender pay gap in the labour force; welcomes, in this regard, the first majority-women cabinet of the current government; points to significant gender differences in participation and quality of work, insufficient action on sexual harassment in the workplace, discrimination in legal provisions related to maternity leave and a lack of childcare and pre-school capacity;
53. Recognises the importance IPA III and the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans for supporting the reform process, sustainable connectivity, human capital, competitiveness and inclusive growth, as well for reinforcing regional and cross-border cooperation; highlights that any investment must be in line with the objectives of the Paris Agreement and EU decarbonisation targets;
54. Recalls that IPA III provides for a strong conditionality in which funding must be modulated or suspended in the case of significant regression or a persistent lack of

progress in the area of the ‘fundamentals’, notably in the field of the rule of law and fundamental rights, including the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as media freedom; stresses that it is in the EU’s own security interests and is its responsibility to guarantee that EU funds do not contribute to corruption; calls, in this context, for the EU and the Western Balkan countries to enhance cross-border judicial cooperation and establish a framework for an effective cooperation with the European Public Prosecutor’s Office, in particular in the area of IPA III funds;

55. Stresses the need to improve the visibility of and communication concerning EU funding in Albania; recalls, in this regard, the substantial support the EU has provided to the Western Balkans to fight the COVID-19 pandemic and to contain the ensuing economic fallout;

Environment, energy and transport

56. Strongly urges authorities to step up measures on biodiversity, water, air, climate protection and regional waste management, including through comprehensive environmental and strategic impact assessments, proper public consultations, transparent procedures across eco-sensitive sectors and rigorous prosecution of environmental crime;
57. Welcomes the designation of the Vjosa river as a nature park⁸, while urging Albanian authorities to establish the Vjosa National Park⁹ as soon as possible covering the entire river, including its free-flowing tributaries;
58. Expresses concerns over the revision of the protected areas network map, which should not contribute to environmental degradation in Albania’s threatened biodiversity-rich coastal and wetland areas;
59. Calls on authorities to prioritise the monitoring and annual reporting of air pollution, noise pollution and surface water quality; notes the necessity of regularly informing the population regarding the status of ambient pollution;
60. Calls for a revision of the national strategy on waste management for 2018-2035 refocusing on the most sophisticated methods for recycling in line with EU standards; stresses the need to use modern filtering technology for incineration plants until a full recycling strategy is in place in order to reduce health and environmental hazards;
61. Calls for further efforts in the field of agriculture and rural development, including by establishing a solid system for consultations with various interest groups in rural areas; stresses the need to develop modern, ecological, climate-friendly small- and medium-scale agriculture that ensures the livelihood of farmers and the protection of Albania’s natural resources and biodiversity;
62. Urges the Albanian authorities to advance on implementing the green agenda for the Western Balkans, which mirrors European Green Deal priorities and the Brdo

⁸ Designated as category IV: Habitat/Species Management Area by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

⁹ IUCN Category II: National Park.

Declaration, adopted at the EU-Western Balkans summit in Brdo pri Kranju on 6 October 2021;

63. Recalls that substantial efforts are needed to enforce the goals relating to efficiency, security, diversification and greening of the energy supply and transport through implementing the Climate Law¹⁰, developing carbon pricing instruments and addressing energy poverty; recalls the necessity of increasing the environmental sustainability of hydro-power, minimising its negative impact and stopping its development in protected areas;
64. Welcomes the launch of the EUR 3.2 billion investment package under the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and highlights the transformative role of these investments; notes with satisfaction that one of the financed projects will be the first floating solar power plant in Albania in the Vau i Dejës reservoir; reaffirms the role of the future Tirana-Podgorica rail link, Elbasan-Bitola electricity interconnector and Fier-Vlora gas pipeline in enhancing regional and trans-European connectivity; welcomes the start of work on the interconnector of the power transmission systems of North Macedonia and Albania; recalls that infrastructure projects, including in the port of Durrës, must comply with EU standards on public procurement contained in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement;
65. Welcomes the removal of roaming charges between the six Western Balkan states; urges all relevant parties to negotiate a plan that would lead to the eventual elimination of roaming charges between Albania and the EU Member States;

Foreign policy and security

66. Commends the fact that Albania remains a reliable and committed external policy partner, fully aligning to the EU's foreign, security and defence policy, and actively contributing to EU crisis-management missions and operations;
67. Commends Albania's strong reaction and speedy alignment with the EU in sanctioning the Russian Federation and its political leadership for its aggression against Ukraine, including the ban on entry into its airspace; welcomes its continued complete alignment with EU restrictive measures;
68. Emphasises the crucial contribution of Albania, as a NATO member, to the protection of the EU's external border and calls for the EU to intensify its support for border security in the region;
69. Applauds the country's commitment to solidarity and multilateralism, including through its 2022-2023 membership on the UN Security Council;
70. Calls on the EU to critically assess historically important security implications for stability and unity on the European continent and in the Western Balkans in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine; urges the Member States to demonstrate European unity by officially starting accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania, considering both geopolitical implications and their fulfilment of official

¹⁰ OJ L 243, 9.7.2021, p. 1.

criteria;

71. Recalls that malicious foreign actors tend to exploit ethnic tensions in the Western Balkans, including in Albania, including by testing information manipulation and hybrid warfare techniques aimed at undermining the EU; recommends that the EU and Albania further exchange best practices and coordinate actions regarding foreign interference and disinformation; underlines the need for the EU and the United States to strengthen their partnership and coordination in the Western Balkans;
72. Calls on the Albanian Government to continue promoting good neighbourly relations and enhancing inclusive regional integration that establishes equal cooperation among all six countries, while further strengthening alignment with EU standards and *acquis* by implementing and developing the Common Regional Market, thus building on the achievements of the Regional Economic Area in enhancing regional connectivity and integration; welcomes Albania's adoption of additional protocols to the Central European Free Trade Agreement;

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73. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the President of the European Council, the Council, the Commission, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the governments and parliaments of the Member States and the President, Government and Parliament of the Republic of Albania.

INFORMATION ON ADOPTION IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

Date adopted	20.4.2022
Result of final vote	+: 66 -: 4 0: 3
Members present for the final vote	Alviina Alametsä, Alexander Alexandrov Yordanov, Maria Arena, Petras Auštrevičius, Traian Băsescu, Anna Bonfrisco, Reinhard Bütikofer, Fabio Massimo Castaldo, Susanna Ceccardi, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, Katalin Cseh, Tanja Fajon, Anna Fotyga, Michael Gahler, Giorgos Georgiou, Sunčana Glavak, Raphaël Glucksmann, Klemen Grošelj, Bernard Guetta, Sandra Kalniete, Karol Karski, Stelios Kouloglou, Andrius Kubilius, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Jean-Lin Lacapelle, David Lega, Miriam Lexmann, Nathalie Loiseau, Leopoldo López Gil, Antonio López-Istúriz White, Claudiu Manda, Lukas Mandl, Thierry Mariani, Pedro Marques, David McAllister, Vangelis Meimarakis, Sven Mikser, Francisco José Millán Mon, Javier Nart, Gheorghe-Vlad Nistor, Urmas Paet, Demetris Papadakis, Kostas Papadakis, Tonino Picula, Manu Pineda, Giuliano Pisapia, Thijs Reuten, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Isabel Santos, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Mounir Satouri, Andreas Schieder, Radosław Sikorski, Jordi Solé, Sergei Stanishev, Tineke Strik, Dominik Tarczyński, Hermann Tertsch, Dragoș Tudorache, Hilde Vautmans, Harald Vilimsky, Idoia Villanueva Ruiz, Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel, Thomas Waitz, Witold Jan Waszczykowski, Isabel Wiseler-Lima, Salima Yenbou, Željana Zovko
Substitutes present for the final vote	Corina Crețu, Angel Dzhambazki, Markéta Gregorová, Marisa Matias, Christian Sagartz

FINAL VOTE BY ROLL CALL IN COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE

66	+
ECR	Angel Dzhambazki, Anna Fotyga, Karol Karski, Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Dominik Tarczyński, Hermann Tertsch, Witold Jan Waszczykowski
ID	Anna Bonfrisco, Susanna Ceccardi
NI	Fabio Massimo Castaldo
PPE	Alexander Alexandrov Yordanov, Traian Băsescu, Michael Gahler, Sunčana Glavak, Sandra Kalniete, Andrius Kubilius, David Lega, Miriam Lexmann, Leopoldo López Gil, Antonio López-Istúriz White, David McAllister, Lukas Mandl, Vangelis Meimarakis, Francisco José Millán Mon, Gheorghe-Vlad Nistor, Christian Sagartz, Radosław Sikorski, Isabel Wiseler-Lima, Željana Zovko
Renew	Petras Auštrevičius, Katalin Cseh, Klemen Grošelj, Bernard Guetta, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Nathalie Loiseau, Javier Nart, Urmas Paet, Dragoș Tudorache, Hilde Vautmans, Salima Yenbou
S&D	Maria Arena, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, Corina Crețu, Tanja Fajon, Raphaël Glucksmann, Claudiu Manda, Pedro Marques, Sven Mikser, Demetris Papadakis, Tonino Picula, Giuliano Pisapia, Thijs Reuten, Nacho Sánchez Amor, Isabel Santos, Andreas Schieder, Sergei Stanishev
The Left	Stelios Kouloglou, Marisa Matias, Idoia Villanueva Ruiz
Verts/ALE	Alviina Alametsä, Reinhard Bütikofer, Markéta Gregorová, Mounir Satouri, Jordi Solé, Tineke Strik, Thomas Waitz

4	-
ID	Jean-Lin Lacapelle, Thierry Mariani, Harald Vilimsky
NI	Kostas Papadakis

3	0
The Left	Giorgos Georgiou, Manu Pineda
Verts/ALE	Viola Von Cramon-Taubadel

Key to symbols:

+ : in favour

- : against

0 : abstention