

Table of Contents

- ***EU and leading NGO unite in calling for adoption of key judicial reform in Albania***
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Leading non-governmental organisation Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) has joined forces with senior European Union political figures in urging members of Albania's opposition Democratic Party to back planned reforms seen as crucial in boosting the country's EU accession ambitions, writes Martin Banks.

By Martin Banks

EUReporter (24.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2mlq4t0> - HRWF, a respected, Brussels-based international advocacy group, called the reforms "essential to guarantee the independence of the judiciary" in the country.

Its intervention on Friday comes after leading German MEP Knut Fleckenstein, the European Parliament's rapporteur on Albania's EU accession, and the EU's enlargement commissioner Johannes Hahn, made a similar response to current protests by Albania's Democrat Party.

The Democrats (DP) have blocked the main boulevard in the capital Tirana for several days saying they do not trust the left-wing government to hold June 18 parliamentary elections fairly. DP plans to boycott parliament, a move which the EU fears could delay the planned implementation of a key justice system reform, which aims to create institutions for the vetting of some 800 judges and prosecutors.

The judicial reform is the main step toward launching Albania's EU membership negotiations. It seeks to root out bribery and ensure that judges and prosecutors are independent from politics.

The DP, which also warns it may boycott parliamentary elections on June 18, has been pushing for electronic voting to allay fears of vote manipulation. But the government has said there is not enough time to implement this for the elections.

The EU wants a revamped judiciary tackling widespread corruption before it starts accession talks with Tirana. The reforms will exclude criminal offenders from public office, provide whistleblower protection and re-evaluate judges, prosecutors and legal advisors.

Hahn told *EU Reporter* he "very much regrets" the parliamentary boycott announced by the opposition.

Hahn said:

"The political debate should not take place outside, but inside the parliament. Cooperation of government and opposition is crucial for the country's ambition to join the EU. In particular, it is of utmost importance to maintain parliamentary continuity in a time where substantial reforms are on the agenda of the parliament, such as the setting up of the vetting bodies in the framework of the justice reform and the electoral reform including the follow-up of the OSCE/ODIHR

election observation recommendations which are essential for ensuring free and fair elections later this year. These reforms are crucial for Albania to move forward on its EU integration path."

The Albanian PM Edi Rama and the country's ruling party have been praised for pressing for the vetting law and justice reform and Hahn's comments are endorsed by Fleckenstein, a Socialist MEP who said it was up to Albania's politicians to implement the reform and start negotiations.

In a reference to the DP's parliamentary boycott, Fleckenstein, who is deputy leader of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament, said: "I really ask the colleagues and friends at the Democratic Party to come back to work."

Elsewhere, Willy Fautre, director of respected Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers, also called on DP to call off its boycott.

On Friday (24 February), Fautre told this website:

"The place of Albania is in the EU family of democratic states. The political debate about free and fair elections in June should not block the justice reform process. The new legislation which has been drafted by the EU and the US but also endorsed by the CoE is essential to guarantee the independence of the judiciary and the non-interference of political and other actors in the administering of justice."

Fautre said: "The opposition should stop boycotting the Parliament so that the democratic legislative process can be resumed and bring Albania closer to EU membership. The sooner the better for both parties."

The EU's ambassador to Tirana, Romana Vlahutin, agreed, saying: "We know there are some individuals that don't want this reform and we know why. But justice will come, despite the repeated attempts to postpone it. There is no time to vote for a new draft and the actual one has our full support. The European future of Albania is more important than the future of some corrupted people."

EU and US experts were directly involved in drafting the reform, which was verified by the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe. Though Albanian lawmakers, including the Democrats, unanimously voted in the reform last year, DP later abstained from voting on how to vet the judges.

Albania's ruling coalition has won all recent local elections and the government led by Rama has overseen a spell of steady economic growth. This is part of its transition to a market-oriented democracy.

Rama said: "True reforms are not easy at all, and often very painful operations. But there is no safe future for the country, our society and children if we do not operate with courage on the rotten parts of the state organisation."

MEPs from various parties have welcomed Albania's progress on EU-related reforms and further efforts to reform the judicial sector, which is a key demand of Albania's citizens and a factor in restoring trust in public institutions.

Fleckenstein, a foreign affairs committee member, adds, "Since summer 2014 Albania has been an EU accession candidate and since then it has been making constant progress. The adoption of a wide-ranging judicial reform is a milestone on Albania's path towards joining the EU and becoming a modern country. Less corruption, less organised

crime is crucial for everyday life in Albania. However, we should not put off the decision on the start of accession negotiations again and again.”

A European Parliament resolution on Albania was approved recently by 546 votes to 85, and notes that credible implementation of justice reform, good progress in fighting organized crime and corruption, and holding free and fair elections in June 2017 could prove to be a key to advancing the EU accession process and starting negotiations.

Albania, once an isolated country in the Balkans suffering under one of the most severe Communist dictatorships after WWII, is now a member of NATO and a leading candidate for EU accession.

But adoption of the reform package last year, together with the constructive attitude that Albania has adopted in the context of the refugee crisis, serve as further examples of the strong national political momentum and desire to see the country advance on its EU membership path. While Albania hopes to be in a position now to be able to open accession negotiations soon, the EU is likely to first look for the proof of the pudding in the implementation of the reforms.

As Fleckenstein said: “It is important for Albania to maintain today’s reform momentum and we must be ready to support it as much as possible in this process”.
