



# The European perspective of **Albania**

Perceptions and  
realities 2020



ALBANIAN INSTITUTE FOR  
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## Introduction

This survey was held immediately after the decision on opening negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia was taken by the Council of the European Union in the end of March after a controversial period when the credibility of the Union institutions was at stake in the region. Having failed to issue this decision, when it was most expected and needed that is in fall of 2019, the EU had seemed to not only jeopardize the integration perspective of these countries but in a wider sense question enlargement policy as a whole.

The timing of this decision, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, impeded any celebrations about the much awaited outcome, despite the fact that Albanian governments had erroneously and prematurely celebrated several times beforehand. Despite the difficult and depressing context

of the pandemic, the public welcomed this decision and experts were quick to commend the EU on being able to move forward even among dire conditions. Emblematic of the times, the decision was taken in an online meeting.

The Albanian public has always been consistently in favor of European integration as a future path of political and economic development but also very importantly and in the symbolic sense as the final closure chapter of the difficult post-communist transition. The integration process has served as a legitimacy umbrella for many reforms. At the same time it has been too often misused in the political narrative and rivalry of actors with short term power goals.

The results of this survey come at the proper timing after the publishing of the new enlargement methodology and after the conditional decision for Albania and before the detailed publication of the negotiation framework with Albania. They can inform the decision makers about the impact and acceptability of reforms in the Albanian context and also guide them in shaping interventions needed to make this support an informed and sustainable one.

Public support is key for two reasons: first it puts pressure on politicians to keep up with conditionality and second it makes reforms more likely to succeed by vesting them with wide acceptance.



Also public support of the younger generation is key in making the delayed and often fatigue-inducing process digestible in the long run.

Albania for the present is at a delicate moment when the decision for negotiations has been accompanied with a total of 15 conditions, 6 of them immediately prior to the holding of the first inter-governmental conference and the 9 left prior to the second one. So far there has been a sort of incomplete political consensus on fulfilling the condition of Electoral Reform which will still be tested in the upcoming elections of 2021. A series of other conditions pertain to the ongoing justice reform and are closely related to rule of law issues.

This survey shows what experts have indicated beforehand as well that more information and more explaining needs to be done for the conditions. Most importantly the conditions have to be kept in the public debate and as subject of monitoring because we already have a tendency of majority politicians to underrate or even negate them. However on their side, the EU institutions and political groups have been very vocal in mentioning the conditions and calling for compliance directly related to them. The tug of war for attention towards and away from the negotiations-related conditions seems to be the latest battle in the long and arduous integration path of Albania where the public's stance will be decisive.

Another necessary field of intervention is repeatedly the timing expectations which reveal that a sizeable group of citizens expect paradoxically a rapid entry into the Union, which requires better investment in communication capabilities of both expertise organizations and EU institutions.

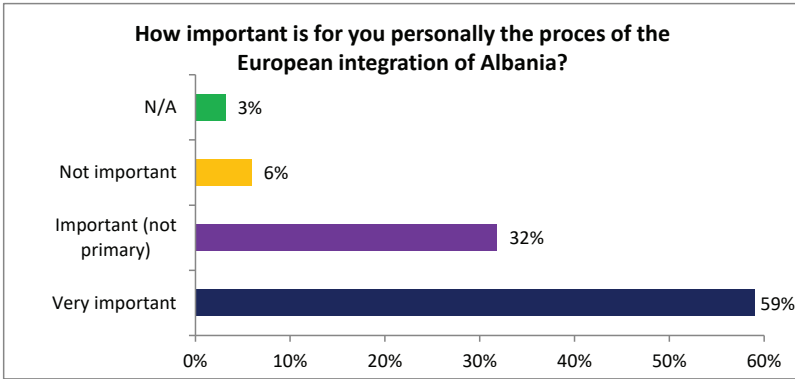


## Progress, factors and expectations

In order to contextualize the support for the European integration, one needs to take into account the overall importance that citizens assign to the process for both symbolic and pragmatic reasons. Asked how important this process is for them personally, almost 60 percent of Albanian citizens, a sizeable majority, respond

**“60 percent of Albanian citizens, a sizeable majority, respond that it is very important”**

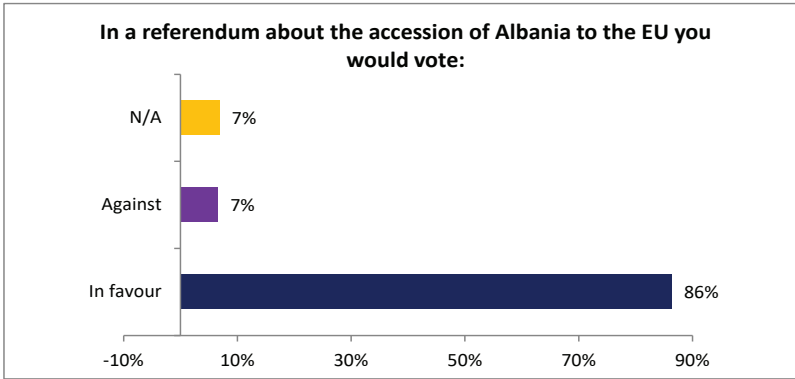
*that it is very important* followed by 32 percent that say it is important. Only 6 percent do not consider this an important process, a clear indicator that almost all the society assigns key significance to the developments related to the European perspective of the country.



In case of a referendum *an overwhelming majority of 86 percent of Albanians would vote 'yes' for the accession of their country into the Union whereas a very small minority of just 7 percent would vote against.* Another small group of 7 percent seems undecided. This level of support, over 85 percent, is unique for Albania and is consistent throughout the years that the Albanian Institute for International Studies as well as other organizations have measured it.

Sometimes called with a note of humor “*a totalitarian support*”, this level of popular backing is at the same time reassuring and also concerning. It is comforting to know that the majority backs the reforms and sees this perspective as unrivaled however when it comes to concrete and detailed understating and expectations about the process the support seems to be based partially on some lack of real information which raises doubts over it.





Last year a survey administered by Eurobarometer and quoted by the EU Delegation in Albania revealed popular support at even higher levels, around 93 percent<sup>1</sup> of the respondents out of a slightly smaller sample of 1000. The question is also slightly different in the fact that it asks re-

**Only 9 percent associate their support with a hope for a stronger democracy.**

spondents to evaluate whether accession would be a good thing rather than expressing their direct political vote for it.

In the same vein, *the reasons why so many Albanians support EU integration remain unchanged*

<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/3/groupKy/312#p=1&search=albania>

over time and pertain to the expected rise in living standards. The economic justification of their choice for citizens has always been the first reason for the hypothetical positive vote for accession. This time about 40 percent of citizens have made the same choice. These are followed by 16 percent who claim they support integration because there will be more employment opportunities and 11 percent who expect less poverty. Both these also are part of the strong pillar of economic reasons. A



**50 percent of those asked say that the EU should not approve Albania's accession until the country is ready**



quarter of Albanians expect better functioning of the rule of law and less corruption thereby stressing the institutional aspect of the process both in establishing and consolidating the right overall framework for further political and economic development. *Only 9 percent associate their support with a hope for a stronger democracy.*

Within the small group of the skeptics which would vote “no”, their given reasons vary quite a lot. About a fifth of them explain their no vote with what they perceive the Union is going through

an economic crisis that would affect Albania negatively. Another fifth of the “nay” voters believe accession would cost Albania jobs that would be grabbed by foreigners.

More concrete economic reasons are given by the rest such as the potential dwindling of the Albanian business position as well as expected inflation. *14 percent of those who are against mention the weakening of national identity as their main concern.*

### **The future: direction and readiness for accession**

The following questions illustrate a common dichotomy or sometimes even controversy within the perceptions of citizens that has always been present among the findings of our surveys. Where-

**46 percent of the respondents knew there were some conditions but not exactly the content whereas 32 percent had knowledge about the concrete content as well**

as people associate general positive evaluations over the country's overall direction at the same

time they can realistically assess that Albania is not ready to become a member of the EU. Therefore 47 percent of those asked believe Albania is moving in the right direction compared to 39 percent who say it's the opposite. A large number of people, amounting to 14 percent of the sample do not give an answer.

About half of the respondents, *46 percent believe that Albania however is not ready to become an EU member state* compared to 38 percent that say the country is ready. Once again 16 percent of those asked do not know or don't give an answer.

*50 percent of those asked say that the EU should not approve Albania's accession until the country is ready* whereas 31 percent believe that the Union should accept Albania despite its lack of readiness. A fifth of the sample has not answered the question either way.

## **Negotiations and accession**

The opening of accession negotiations has been the nexus of public attention for quite some time in Albania, having been announced to happen by the government several times when instead the decision was negative including the fall of 2019. When it finally happened in March 2020, public attention was elsewhere, affected by the global pan-

demic. Therefore the fact that the decision for Albania was conditional did not register with all of the public and indeed seems to have poorly registered also with the Prime Minister who spoke to the media of the nonexistence of conditions prior to the first intergovernmental conference. However in the recent vote of the European parliament a formal acknowledgement of this fact was adopted reminding quite forcefully the political class that the conditions stand.<sup>2</sup>



**A full 45 percent of the respondents expect Albania to become a EU member state within the next five years, a timeframe which is highly unrealistic**



In the spring of 2020 most Albanians did know that the opening of negotiations came with a list of conditions. 46 percent of them knew there were some conditions but not exactly the content whereas 32 percent had knowledge about the concrete content as well. Only 16 percent did not know that the decision was conditional.

When asked about their expectations of the timing when the country will be able to fulfill

<sup>2</sup> “EU approves amendments in resolution”, June 19, 2020 Tirana Times <https://www.tiranatimes.com/?p=146342>

these conditions, most of the respondents seem overly optimistic pointing that such a thing can happen within a very short time: 9 percent went as far as saying all conditions will be fulfilled within this year whereas more than 20 percent gave a deadline at the end of 2021 and another 23 percent expect it by the end of 2022.

*30 percent of the group say however that conditions will take longer than even the end of 2022.*

Only a very small fraction of 5 percent seem pessimistic at the degree that they don't believe conditions will ever be fulfilled.

**About 45 percent of the respondents believe the key institution is the government. This is persisting trend from all the years before**

As for the accession timing itself, the tendency of the public to oversimplify and expect a quick entry persists. *A full 45 percent of the respondents expect Albania to become a EU member state within the next five years, a timeframe which is highly unrealistic given the fact that negotiations have opened only de jure and not even a single chapter has been opened de-facto.* Another group of 29 percent gives a wider timeframe expecting membership within the next decade. *8 percent of*

*the respondents believe it will take longer than 2030 whereas only 4 percent don't think it will ever happen. Around 1 in 10 Albanians does not know or cannot answer this question.*

The dominance of the executive branch in the public understanding as the key factor determining progress in integration is unchallenged. *About 45 percent of the respondents believe the key institution is the government. This is persisting trend from all the years before. Only 17 percent think the Parliament has the most important role on this process, largely similar with the number of people who assign the same importance to the Albanian society, 13 percent, and to the international community, again 13 percent. The rest, 8 percent subscribe to the view that the process depends on political parties.*

## **Information sources**

Finally citizens were asked about a self-evaluation of their information level about the EU and the process of European integration as well as to identify their information sources.

Slightly more than half of them, 53 percent say they feel averagely informed about EU and integration whereas 23 percent feel that there is a lack of information. A similar group of 22 percent on

the other side feel quite well informed about it.

*Television continues to be on top of the list of information sources with a full third of the sample using TV news and programs to be informed about EU and the process of integration of Albania and the region. This is followed by the Internet which has been gaining prominence year by year and now stands as the primary source for 26 percent of Albanians, primarily young.*

Conversations with friends are the way to be informed for a tenth of the sample and newspaper are the go to source for another tenth of them.

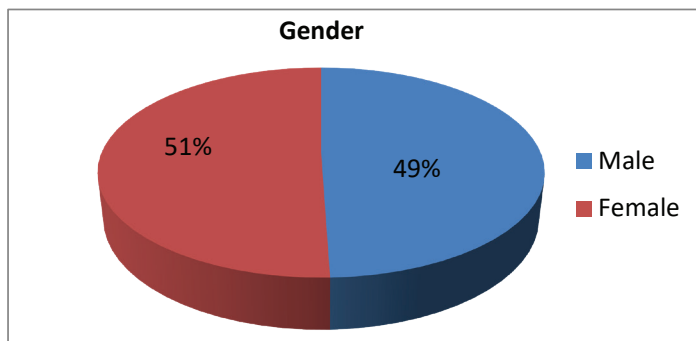
Various publications of civil society organizations as well as the events of the EU Delegation in Albania stand for about 5 percent each.



## Demographic data and methodology clarifications

The questionnaire has been designed by AIIS European Program researchers and reviewed by field experts for relevance and consistency.

This survey is based on a representative sample of 1200 questionnaires administered face to face in 12 regions of Albania. The direct interviewing model has been tested by AIIS for years



and proves to be efficient in increasing participation level and direct answers to questions. The pollsters have been trained and briefed by AIIS

beforehand. The respondents' diversity in terms of gender, age, occupation and education background as shown in the graphs below is a testament to its quality. As with every survey, the results shown in our study are subject of a margin of error of  $\pm 2.5$  percent.

