



Republic of Albania
Prime Minister

Tirana, 16 November 2017

Excellency,

The European Union will soon decide on a timetable for negotiations with my government towards Albania's accession. This is a stage Albanians of all political persuasions have looked forward to for most of the past two decades. As Prime Minister, it is my duty to tell you about the often very difficult steps we in Albania have taken and are taking now to prepare ourselves for conformity with the *acquis communautaire*.

As you will be aware, the European Union granted Albania candidate status in 2014. The previous year the European Commission set five key conditions for accession talks to begin. They were administrative reform, enhanced protection of human rights, progress in the battle against corruption, reform of the judiciary and robust measures against organised crime.

My government, in office for just a month at that time, understood the extraordinary challenges represented by these conditions. We had been given a responsibility. We chose to act.

One year ago, the European Commission recommended opening of accession negotiations with Albania in view of the progress in meeting the key priorities and subject to credible and tangible progress in the implementation of the justice reform, in particular the re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors. Passage and implementation of this have been massive undertakings strongly opposed by vested interests whose resistance at times has even placed our young democratic system at risk. But we stood our ground and, based on the results of parliamentary elections earlier this year, I can say that Albanian citizens stood with us.

Now we have taken our responsibility a further step. In recent days, my Government has approved ambitious plans to combat organized crime. We have placed gang leaders on notice: Wherever they may be hiding, we will find and arrest them, and we will charge them, trusting our newly reformed justice system to send those convicted to prison. And we will confiscate their illicit assets. The criminal sub-culture Albanians have endured for years is coming to an end. We are in the process of building a nationwide law enforcement infrastructure specifically designed to root out this blight and to prevent it from infecting future generations.

But Albanians have not been alone in suffering the depredations of our nation's crime bosses. We know that some reside and are thriving in your nation too, profiting from illegal drugs, prostitution, human trafficking and other illicit activities. We want your help and offer ours in return, to catch these people and bring them to justice.

Albanians understand perfectly well how their nation's recent history has brought them international opprobrium. In the early lawless years following the fall of our dictatorship, the cultivation of cannabis seemed for some an easy answer to hard times and chaos. It represented quick profits. In the early years, it wasn't even illegal. Later, police, prosecutors and judges could be easily bought off. There was political protection from the highest levels of government. Gang leaders enjoyed prestige and local admiration.

My government came to power in September 2013 committed to ending this lawlessness. In June 2014, we ordered a major anti-drugs operation in the southern town of Lazarat, which had become a "no-go" area for state police under a previous government.

We have been engaged in this battle ever since, assisted by Italy's financial police, the Guardia di Finanza, and the EU. We have had results. Last week, the Italian General Stefano Screpanti of the Guardia, disclosed a stunning change. Last year, the Guardia's air surveillance over Albania reported 2,086 suspected cannabis plantations across Albania. The information led to scores of arrests and the destruction of crops. As a result, this year's surveillance revealed just 88 suspected plantations, or 150 times less compared to last year.

In other words, Albania is no longer Europe's cannabis capital, as some media have enjoyed calling it. The cannabis industry is dying. We are aiming to bring it to a full stop, once and for all, by the end of this year.

There is much left to do. Cannabis production gave rise to the development of trade routes, and investments in transport equipment and personnel which have been repurposed for smuggling and trans-shipment from international sources. We are committed to working with all our international partners to eliminate this too.

The point I wish to make is that there has been a step-change in Albania, from the chaotic post-communist state of 27 years ago to the orderly, law-abiding and vibrant nation visible today. We owe much to the EU for technical and economic assistance. But we owe even more to our own aspirations to engage with and be part of the EU community of nations, sharing their values and their respect for democracy and the rule of law. Speaking through the ballot box, Albanian citizens have told us unambiguously that this is what they want. It is my government's responsibility to see it through.

We hope you will support us as we move to the next stage in our development, leading to full accession and membership in the European family.

With warm regards,



Edi Rama

H.E. Édouard Philippe
Prime Minister of France
Paris, France