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Modeling Growth – Challenges and Opportunities: "The Growth Plan for Albania"

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Abstract: The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, presented by the European Union, aims to accelerate the region's integration into the European Single Market through structural reforms and alignment with EU policies. As a candidate country for EU membership, Albania faces significant challenges in reforming the education and scientific research systems, which are essential components of its long-term model for economic growth and development. This study focuses on the impact of Chapter 25 "Science and Research" and Chapter 26 "Education and Culture", on Albania's European Integration process and how these chapters align with the objectives of the Growth Plan. Chapter 25 emphasizes increasing investments in research and innovation, improving scientific infrastructure and strengthening collaboration between universities and the private sector. On the other hand, Chapter 26 addresses the harmonization of the Albanian education system with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and ensuring mutual recognition of qualifications. The paper analyzes the concrete measures undertaken by the Albanian government in the fields of education and scientific research, along with the progress and continuity of the reforms outlined in the Growth Plan. Although, Albania has made strides toward aligning with European standards, it continues to face persistent challenges, including underfunding of research and innovation, weak academia-industry linkages and the lack of sustainable frameworks for human capital development. The Growth Plan represents a strategic opportunity to accelerate reform implementation and enhance Albania's competitiveness within the EU context. This study seeks to identify the key actions Albania is undertaking to fully leverage the Growth Plan, ensuring a sustainable transformation of its higher education and research systems as critical drivers of economic development and European integration.

Keywords: European Integration; Growth Plan; Education; Scientific Research

JEL Classification: I23; O3; F15; H52; O19

1. Introduction

The European Integration process has been constituted one of Albania's most important strategic objectives, has been perceived as a pathway toward strengthening democracy, ensuring human rights, upholding the rule of law and achieving sustainable social and economic development. This process not only aims to align Albanian legislation with the EU acquis but also to integrate the country into Europe's

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political, social and economic structures. EU membership represents an opportunity to secure a better and more stable future for Albanian citizens and to strengthen the country's international standing.

According to the Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 424, dated 22.06.2022 "*On the approval of the opening statement of the Republic of Albania, the general position, in the framework of the First Intergovernmental Conference for the accession of the Republic of Albania to the European Union" it is stated that: "Albania accepts the implementation of the EU acquis into its national legal order. Albania has continued to harmonize its legislation and capacities with European standards and commits to substantial and sustained efforts that will be necessary for the general preparations for the adoption and implementation of the EU acquis, including intensified efforts to strengthen administrative capacities and to establish appropriate institutional structures prior to accession."*

This article focuses on analyzing the progress of Chapter 25 "Science and Research" and Chapter 26 "Education and Culture" of the EU Acquis Communautaire. Both chapters are considered part of the *soft acquis*[1], meaning they do not require major legislative changes but rather focus on capacity building and international cooperation.

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, presented by the European Union, aims to accelerate the region's integration into the European Single Market through structural reforms and alignment with EU policies. As part of the Enlargement Package, the European Commission launched the initiative for the proposal of the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans (WB) on November 8, 2023, which includes support through the *"Facility for Reform and Growth for the Western Balkans"* Instrument.[2] This new development initiative will provide financial support of up to 6 billion euros for the period 2024-2027 for all six countries of the Western Balkans (WB). The "Facility for Reform and Growth for the Western Balkans"[3] Instrument supports the third and fourth pillars of the European Union's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. The aim is to accelerate the socio-economic convergence of the Western Balkans with EU member states, particularly deepened by the consequences of the economic crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the global energy crisis due to Russia's aggression in Ukraine, through efforts aimed at doubling economic growth.

The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans[4] presents a new and comprehensive strategy to accelerate the gradual integration of the region's countries into the European single market. This plan is built on four main pillars[5]: *1. Economic integration with the single market, 2. Regional economic integration through the Common Regional Market, 3. Fundamental reforms and 4. Increased financial assistance through the Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans (RGFWB, Facility)*. The ultimate objective is for the Western Balkan countries to align as closely as possible with the standards, policies and functioning of the EU prior to full membership.

In the case of Albania, the Growth Plan represents an important opportunity to address structural weaknesses and accelerate reforms in key areas such as the rule of law, education, innovation and economic development. Gradual participation in the common market provides the country with earlier access to the free movement of goods, services and capital, as well as European support schemes, creating more favorable conditions for foreign investment and increased competitiveness. Meanwhile,

[1] Chapters of the acquis https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/conditions-membership/chapters-acquis_en
[2] European Commission, Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood; https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-approves-reform-agendas-albania-kosovo-montenegro-northmacedonia-and-serbia-paving-way-2024-10-23_en.
[3] Commission welcomes political agreement on the €6 billion Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_1688?utm_source.
[4] New growth plan for the Western Balkans, p. 1.
[5] Right there.

reforms in public administration and the judiciary system are fundamental prerequisites for maximizing the benefits of this plan. Although, Albania has taken some positive steps, the real benefit from the Growth Plan will depend on the country's capacity to implement the necessary reforms with commitment and transparency. The Growth Plan is not just a financial instrument, but a transformative mechanism that can guide Albania toward a sustainable development model and a real and tangible integration into the European family.

The paper aims to examine the concrete measures undertaken by the Albanian government in the fields of education and scientific research, as well as the progress in implementing the reforms in education and research outlined in the Growth Plan. Despite efforts toward alignment with European standards, Albania still faces challenges such as increasing funding for research and innovation and enhancing sustainable schemes for human capital development. In this context, the Growth Plan represents an important opportunity to accelerate reforms and strengthen the country's competitiveness at the European level.

2. Methodological Aspects

This study is based on a qualitative and analytical approach, examining European Union international reports, strategic documents of the Albanian government and the progress of reforms implemented within the framework of the Growth Plan in the fields of education and scientific research. By reviewing Chapters 25 and 26 of the EU Acquis Communautaire, as well as analyzing Albania's progress in the integration process from the establishment of relations with the EU since 1991 to the official opening of negotiations in 2022 and through the alignment of legal acts for the period 2014-2024, the aim is to assess the extent to which reforms in higher education and scientific research contribute to the development and real convergence of the country developments with European standards. The methodology is also based on comparing the objectives of the Growth Plan with the concrete measures undertaken, identifying gaps, challenges and opportunities for improvement.

3. Literature Review

The process of Albania's integration into the European Union represents one of the most important strategic priorities of the Albanian state since the country signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement[1]. The progress of this process has gone through several significant stages. The most important phases[2] of this process include the granting of candidate status for EU membership in 2014 and the opening of official negotiations in 2022:

- 2014: Candidate country status;
- 2020: European Council: Decision to open negotiations;
- 2022: First Intergovernmental Conference Albania - European Union - Official opening of negotiations;
- 2022–2023: Bilateral Screening Process (33 chapters and 3 criteria);

[1] Law No. 9590, date 27.07.2006 "On the ratification of the Stabilization and Association Agreement between the European Communities and their member states and the Republic of Albania" https://www.dap.gov.al/publikime/dokumenta-strategjik/61-marreveshja-e-stabilizim-asociimit.

[2] Albania, EU membership application & Accession negotiations https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/albania/?utm_source.

- 2024-2025[1]: Opening of Negotiations: Groupings of Chapters;

  October 15, 2024 – Opening of Cluster I "Fundamentals";

  December 17, 2024 – Opening of Cluster VI "External Relations";

  April 14, 2025 – Opening of Cluster II "Internal Market"';

  May 22, 2025 – Opening of Cluster III "Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth";

  Clusters IV and V are expected to be opened within the year 2025.

With the title *"Improvement of the Accession Process – Credible European Perspectives",*[2] the European Commission presented a new methodology for EU enlargement in March 2020. The methodology is based on four main pillars/approaches:

First, the *"clustered chapters"* approach or gradual integration/association brings a greater focus on achieving progress at the national level. The closure of negotiations corresponding to the completion of each phase will open opportunities for participation in EU programs, inclusion in specific sectoral policies and when appropriate, access to certain financial aids.

Second, *conditionality based on criteria*. The criteria for moving from one phase to the next will be defined in detail, enabling the verification of adoption and effective and sustainable implementation of the "Acquis" related to a specific policy. This will primarily be based on sustainable, irreversible progress in the field of the rule of law. Final membership will be determined based on the fulfillment of tangible economic and social convergence objectives.

Third, *tangible benefits* or the performance-based approach related to the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance, along with the reversibility clause, represent significant incentives. In addition to the benefits from gradual participation in EU policies, additional financial support may be provided.

Fourth, *participation in a greater number of EU programs* immediately after the completion of negotiations according to respective groupings.

The new accession methodology requires the continuation of coordinated and simultaneous reforms and policies across all sectors to fulfill the EU accession criteria and the obligations of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA). The phases[3] are presented as follows:

1. Screening process;
2. Opening of Cluster I (opened first, closed last);
3. Opening of 5 other clusters consecutively;
4. Fulfillment of the accession criteria: Intermediate conditions;
5. Closing: Closing conditions;
6. Signing of the Accession Treaty;
7. Ratification of the Accession Treaty;
8. Accession to the EU.

[1] Right there.
[2] European Commission 2020 "*Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the region Enhancing the accession process - a credible EU perspective for the Western Balkans"* https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52020DC0057.
[3] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/202210/eu_accession_process_clusters%20%28oct%202022%29.pdf.

During the period 2024-2025, Albania has entered key phases of opening negotiations for EU membership, opening the first and the most important chapters of the integration process. Cluster I "Fundamentals" includes the most important elements for the country's stability, such as the rule of law and justice. This cluster is the first and most important, as it contains the conditions for the functioning of democratic institutions and for the fight against corruption. Subsequently, Cluster VI "External Relations" was opened, covering foreign policy and diplomatic relations, ensuring that Albania aligns its foreign policy with that of the European Union. Another important step was the opening of Cluster II "Internal Market" and Cluster III "Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth". The latter aims to strengthen economic sectors and provide Albania with the opportunity to increase competition and integration with the EU's internal market. During 2025, the opening of Clusters IV and V is also expected. After the opening of these clusters groups, Albania will continue to work toward fulfilling all the conditions set by the EU to ensure the fulfillment of membership criteria by 2030.

In this context, the integration process should not be viewed merely as an end goal, but as an opportunity for a profound transformation of the Albanian state and society. Close cooperation with EU institutions, inter-institutional coordination within the country and the active engagement of civil society remain key factors in advancing along this path and ensuring that European Integration translates into a tangible improvement in the lives of Albanian citizens.

Legal Acts Planned in the National Plan for European Integration

The analysis of the acts included in the National Plan for European Integration (NPEI) for Chapters 25 "Science and Research" and 26 "Education and Culture" during the period 2014–2024 shows a steady progress in aligning Albanian legislation with the European Union's acquis in these areas. Chapters 25 and 26 of the acquis are considered "soft acquis" because they do not require mandatory legal harmonization and respect the national competences of member states in these fields. The focus is more on cooperation, capacity building and participation in EU programs rather than strict regulatory obligations. The NPEI includes acts that are planned for adoption over a two-year period and the acts that are not adopted within this period are automatically carried over into the following NPEI, ensuring a continuous and sustainable process of implementing reforms and alignment with the Acquis Communautaire. According to the new methodology outlined in the National Plan for European Integration (NPEI), a range of measures is included, such as *legal acts* like laws, decisions of the Council of Ministers (DCM), *orders and guidelines* from ministries; *administrative measures*; development of *institutional capacities*; and i*nvestments*, all of which aim to achieve the integration objectives and alignment with the Acquis Communautaire.

The adopted legal acts within the period 2014-2024[1]**, demonstrate Albania's clear commitment to aligning its national legislation with that of the European Union, particularly in the field of scientific research and innovation.** The ratification of agreements for participation in programmes such as Horizon, COSME, and EaSI, as well as cooperation with organizations like CERN, is indicative of the country's gradual integration into European scientific networks. These measures aim not only to enhance research capacities but also to promote the internationalization of the Albanian academic and scientific community. The focus has shifted towards a deeper institutional reform of the research system. These reforms are intended to improve the quality, transparency and efficiency in the use of public funds and in the evaluation of scientific output.

[1] Acts included in the National European Integration Plan from 2014 to 2024 for Chapter 25.

In the field of education and culture, within the period 2014-2024[1] **Albania has undertaken a series of initiatives that reflect alignment with the Bologna Declaration and relevant European directives.** The laws and by-laws related to quality assurance, student credit systems and public education financing schemes represent important steps toward building a sustainable and equitable education system comparable to those of EU member states. Furthermore, the emphasis placed on the interconnection between scientific research and higher education is in line with the principles of the European Higher Education Area.

The adoption of national strategies for education, culture, youth and research in line with the EU acquis has played a guiding role in setting priorities and action plans.

Major challenges remain in the effective implementation of these policies and the provision of necessary financial and human resources. While legislation has significantly advanced in accordance with European standards, institutional oversight and the assessment of the practical impact of these measures remain areas requiring further improvement, so that reforms are not confined to paper, but effectively enhance the quality of education and research in the country.

Progress Reports for Albania

The analysis of the European Union's progress reports for Albania from 2014 to 2024, specifically for chapters 25 and 26, demonstrates a steady trajectory and moderate[2] progress in aligning with EU standards. These chapters, part of the "Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth" cluster, have been considered as areas with potential for further development and close cooperation with the EU. According to the 2024 Progress Report, "*Albania has made efforts to improve the fields of science, research, education, and culture; however, challenges such as the lack of funding and insufficient capacities continue to hinder faster progress. To further advance in the European integration process, Albania must intensify its efforts to address these challenges and meet EU standards in these areas."*

In the field of science and research, the European Commission[3] has acknowledged that "*efforts have been made to improve research infrastructure and increase participation in EU research programs. Albania was included for the second time in the EU Innovation Scoreboard as an emerging innovator and established a regional center for the Institute of Innovation and Technology for Raw Materials in Elbasan. Another achievement is the completion of the entrepreneurial discovery process for the smart specialization strategy (S3), the adoption of the law, and the progress of the strategy for scientific research."*

The latest Progress Report (Albania 2024 Report) for Chapter 25 recommends that "*Albania should increase investments in scientific research to achieve the target of 1% of GDP by 2030 and should encourage greater participation of the private sector in R&D. The secondary legislation for the new law on scientific research should be adopted, the smart specialization strategy (S3) should be further developed; and initiatives to increase transparency and create a reliable database for research and innovation should continue. Furthermore, Albania should strengthen international cooperation and encourage participation in EU programs, such as Horizon Europe, to foster research development and increase opportunities for funding and knowledge exchange."*

[1] Acts included in the National European Integration Plan from 2014 to 2024 for Chapter 26.
[2] Albania 2024 Report, page 77-78; https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-8748-9058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf.
[3] Right there.

In the field of education and culture, the European Commission[1] has acknowledged that *"Albania has made progress in improving education and vocational training. The curricula for information and communication technology were updated, and teachers and school principals were trained. The National Program for Teacher Professional Development was launched in January 2024, and the number of students with special needs receiving support increased. Albania continued to participate in EU programs such as Erasmus+ and Creative Europe, benefiting from projects aimed at strengthening higher education capacities. Additionally, activities were held to promote participation in these international programs, and several cultural heritage sites were restored."*

The latest Progress Report (Albania 2024 Report) for Chapter 26 recommends that *"In order to improve the education and culture sectors in Albania and meet the European Union standards, it is recommended to increase funding for education, improve the quality of teaching, and align curricula with labor market needs, particularly in the fields of digital skills. Efforts should also be intensified to include vulnerable groups, including children with disabilities and those from Roma communities, as well as to ensure resources for optimizing vocational education and training (VET) and its development in line with labor market demands. Active participation in international programs such as Erasmus+ should continue, and the implementation of laws on cultural heritage and the preservation of cultural assets should be strengthened to enable sustainable and inclusive development."*

Data Analysis -The Progress of Measures in the Growth Plan.

As part of the Western Balkans Growth Plan, a series of strategic measures have been undertaken to accelerate the alignment of the education and scientific research systems with the European Union standards, particularly in relation to Chapters 25 and 26. This process includes the modernization of curricula, improvement of teaching quality, teacher training, as well as further development of scientific research through support for international collaboration and the enhancement of higher education institutions capacities. Additionally, the focus on the development of digital skills and the implementation of strategies is a key step in meeting EU requirements and ensuring sustainable and equitable development in these areas.

The measures[2] included in the growth plan pursued by the Ministry of Education and Sports, under the "Human Capital" grouping, are as follows:

- Updating curricula in pre-university education (primary and secondary education);
- Updating the National Qualifications Framework, establishing a clear and transparent relationship between national qualification levels and the corresponding levels of the European Qualifications Framework;
- Strengthening the national research and innovation environment by adopting the strategic capacity framework

Albania and North Macedonia are the first two countries to receive pre-financing under the European Union's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans. This development marks a concrete step toward the implementation of the EU's ambitious initiative, which aims to accelerate the region's integration through a combination of structural reforms and strategic investments. Backed by a €6 billion fund for the period 2024–2027, the Growth Plan serves as a key political and financial instrument designed not

[1] Albania 2024 Report, page 77-78; https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-8748-9058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf

[2] Decision No. 621, dated 10.10.2024 "On the approval of the policy document "National Reform Agenda 2024–2027", within the framework of the European Union instrument "Facility for Reforms and Growth for the Western Balkans".

only to strengthen economic ties between the Western Balkans and the EU but also to incentivize the adoption of reforms aligned with European standards and values. The early access to funding by Albania and North Macedonia can be seen as an indication of their progress in meeting the necessary criteria, as well as a reflection of their political commitment to advancing on the European integration path.

In March 2025, Albania[1] received €64.5 million in pre-financing under the EU's Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, marking a significant milestone in the country's path toward European integration. This initial disbursement includes €30 million in the form of a loan dedicated to supporting the implementation of key structural reforms outlined in Albania's Reform Agenda and an additional €34.5 million through the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF), aimed at financing infrastructure projects in critical sectors such as transport, energy and digitalization.

This financial package is part of a broader EU commitment of €920 million expected to be allocated to Albania by 2027. The support reflects both the EU's strategic interest in accelerating the convergence of the Western Balkans with the Union and Albania's readiness to undertake reforms that align with EU standards. The allocation of these funds is performance-based, linking disbursements directly to tangible progress in reform implementation and project delivery, thereby reinforcing accountability and impact in Albania's European integration trajectory.

Until May 2025, the latest reports show a continuation of work in fulfilling the commitments undertaken by the Albanian authorities within the framework of the European integration process. The implementation of the measures foreseen in the Reform Agenda has marked steady progress in several priority areas, reflecting a continuous institutional commitment to meet the standards required by the European Union.

Significant progress has been made in key areas related to education reform, qualifications recognition and the national research ecosystem, aligned with Albania's broader European integration agenda.

The updating of pre-university curricula, particularly in primary and secondary education, has been accompanied by the launch of the *National Professional Development Program* for teaching staff. This initiative reflects a structured approach to improving the quality of teaching by equipping educators with advanced pedagogical tools. The training emphasizes not only content mastery in core subjects (Albanian Language and Literature, Mathematics, Sciences, Social Studies), but also the implementation of modern, student-centered methodologies. Special focus is given to integrating the STEM approach, encouraging critical thinking, creativity and the application of knowledge in real-life contexts. The inclusion of modules on conflict management, communication and transversal competencies indicates an effort to address holistic teacher capacity and school environment improvement. The program has now entered the implementation phase, indicating institutional readiness and commitment to long-term education quality enhancement.

Work on updating the National Qualifications Framework demonstrates an effort to improve transparency and comparability of Albanian qualifications within the European Higher Education Area. The review of standards for Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral levels reflects a phased but focused approach toward ensuring full compatibility with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This alignment is critical for increasing the recognition of Albanian qualifications abroad and enhancing mobility opportunities for students and professionals.

In the area of research and innovation, Albania has taken structural steps by adopting the new Law on *Science and Scientific Research*. This legislative development provides the basis for a more coherent

[1] Right there.

and strategic national research system. The establishment of working groups to draft subordinate legislation indicates a consultative and phased policy development process. Importantly, the government's commitment to promoting *Open Science* is a strategic shift, aiming to provide researchers with broader access to scientific resources and foster international collaboration. This marks a move toward a more inclusive and globally connected research environment.

5. Conclusions

The process of Albania's integration into the European Union presents an opportunity to transform the country, providing avenues for sustainable development, strengthening institutions and improving the lives of its citizens. This process requires deep and sustained commitment to reforms and the fulfillment of membership criteria, with a particular focus on the fight against corruption, economic development and full integration into the EU's single market. If the necessary reforms are implemented with determination and dedication, Albania could achieve its goal of membership by 2030 and become a part of the European Union.

The measures undertaken within the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans have made progress toward accelerating the alignment of the education system and scientific research with EU standards. This work has included the updating of curricula, the development of teachers' professional skills and the strengthening of scientific research and innovation. Efforts to improve qualifications and enhance capacities have led to significant steps forward, while the financial support secured through pre-financing and other investments from the EU provides a great opportunity for advancing reforms and achieving the set objectives. Progress in these areas is visible, but challenges remain in the implementation of measures and ensuring sufficient resources for the full realization of the planned goals.

In conclusion, Albania has made notable progress in aligning its legislation with EU standards in the fields of science, education, culture and youth; however, further commitment is needed for the effective implementation of policies and the monitoring of their impact in practice.

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