

Growth Plan Dialogue Platform, First Roundtable

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Marriott Tirana, Amantia

The inaugural roundtable of N-CoMER took place today, marking the official launch of this newly established, civil society-led platform. This first activity brought together civic and institutional actors, as well as international partners, to review the progress of the Reform Agenda, discuss the role of national consultation and coordination bodies, and explore participatory strategies for its execution.

Sotirag Hroni, Executive Director of IDM, stated that the Growth Plan is an innovative EU initiative for the Western Balkans, aimed at accelerating reforms and preparing local institutions for EU integration. With the legal and administrative frameworks now in place, the focus shifts to effective implementation. He added that responsible ministries face a complex process requiring strengthened capacities and accountability, while emphasizing transparency and the inclusive involvement of civil society and the private sector. Hroni stressed that the prompt establishment of the Monitoring Committee is crucial and noted that IDM will monitor reforms and engage social actors over the next three years, supporting institutions and ensuring broad adoption of the Plan. He concluded by highlighting that this initiative serves as a vital bridge between local institutions, civil society, and the EU.

Mr. Hubert Perr, Head of Cooperation, European Delegation in Albania began his speech by emphasizing that the accession process has been at the forefront of recent discussions. He stated that Albania's EU accession is real and fast-moving, with many developments in the last 18 months that had not occurred in the previous 20 years. He stressed the importance of embracing this window of opportunity, especially since Albania has opened 4 out of 6 negotiation clusters. Mr. Perr also highlighted that the European Parliament has adopted the report on Albania, acknowledging the accelerated accession process and the EU Growth Plan, while urging the continuation of necessary reforms.

"One thing is to open negotiations, and another is to assess, after the screening, where the country stands and to address the gaps," he explained. He added that this is not an easy task, noting that the *acquis* itself is not negotiable. The Reform and Growth Facility for the Western Balkans comes at the right moment. As Marta Kos emphasized during her engagements with civil society, enlargement is a whole-of-society process, making it essential for the public to be well-informed and actively engaged. Therefore, the EU envisions the Reform and Growth Facility as a project that genuinely involves and benefits every segment of society, ensuring a transparent, accountable, and inclusive process. This initiative shows that the EU aims to support not only economic development but also broader socio-economic transformation.

Albania has been a success story in terms of growth. "I say 'EU' and not just 'European Commission' because the funding comes from EU taxpayers, many of whom live in member states currently facing difficult conditions. Nevertheless, we recognize the importance of supporting the accession process financially, provided it is accompanied by genuine reforms," he stated.

The EU has identified the right areas to support, as these are crucial for societal transformation. The agreement includes clear entry points for transparency, accountability, and dialogue, one of which is the creation of a scoreboard that collects and displays information from the respective

countries. Another key component is the Reform and Growth Facility Monitoring Committee, which includes representatives from civil society, the private sector, and academia to ensure a broad range of perspectives in monitoring reform progress.

Ms. Eridana Cano, General Director of the State Agency for Strategic Planning and Aid Coordination (SASPAC), stated that the Growth Plan and the Reform Agenda represent a new and significant exercise for Albania. She outlined the critical role of SASPAC in this process and highlighted that line ministries are key actors, as the successful implementation of the Growth Plan and Reform Agenda largely depends on their active involvement. Ms. Cano emphasized that these initiatives serve as essential socio-economic tools for the country's overall performance. She also stressed the importance of accountability, transparency, and cooperation with civil society partners.

Ms. Cano stated that Civil Society Organizations play a vital role in inclusive policymaking, democratic oversight, and fostering social cohesion. Through the RFG Facility, which is also complemented by other programs and donor support, Albania aims to strengthen democratic institutions, promote human rights, and progressively align national policies with EU social, climate, and environmental standards. This also contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Growth Plan is crucial for supporting investments across four key pillars, such as digitalization, energy, transport, and human capital. Civil society organizations inform, advocate, and engage in public policymaking to ensure that the reform agenda implementation is not merely a technical process, but a truly democratic one. The N-Comer Platform is expected to be a valuable instrument for generating and sharing outputs.

The National Coordinator is responsible for overseeing financial management, as well as monitoring and evaluating the entire program. Cano added that SASPAC's role will be supported by a dedicated office, established as an ad hoc mechanism to ensure day-to-day cooperation across institutions. To ensure full transparency, the committee will define rules and procedures and adopt measures to prevent conflicts of interest. All line ministries and institutions are formally mandated to implement reforms and achieve milestones within established timelines and standards.

The Ministry of Finance will play a vital role in preventing, detecting, and remediating irregularities, fraud, corruption, and other activities that could pose risks. Cano pointed out that by June 2025, 20 measures will be reported by 8 institutions, and by December 2025, 30 measures will be reported by 20 lead institutions. Lastly, she emphasized that SASPAC maintains an open-door policy for all interested stakeholders.

Ms. Fotjona Taçe, Chief of Cabinet at the Ministry for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption, stated that this instrument for the Western Balkans helps ministries improve quality and include all relevant actors in the process. She emphasized that reforms do not progress solely through strategic documents but require cooperation and patience. One of the main reforms is the platform Transparent Albania, which is not just a portal but an open window for citizens. The platform provides a simple-to-use space and will include data on the state budget, Council of Ministers decisions, and other documents at both local and national levels. She added that this is not just a technical measure but represents a new form of governance. The second measure focuses on cadaster transparency and efficiency, with the ministry conducting a risk analysis to

address corruption in the state cadaster. Ms. Taçe affirmed that they aim to achieve results that are quick, clear, and concrete, and are actively working to accomplish these goals.

Tetis Lubonja, Director of Projects at the Ministry of Justice of Albania, spoke about the technical measures related to the Growth Plan. She emphasized that the first priority is the consolidation of transparency and accountability in the judiciary. This includes the evaluation of vetting cases, which has resulted in 805 reports being submitted to SPAK.

She also highlighted the need for greater transparency in judicial appointments, calling on the High Judicial Council (KLGJ) and the High Prosecutorial Council (KLP) to ensure openness in their processes. In addition, Lubonja outlined a strategy that involves conducting an inventory and analysis of case files to address old or delayed cases. She presented numerical data on the number of files reviewed as part of this effort. The third key measure focuses on strengthening freedom of speech, with special attention to addressing violence against journalists. To support this, the State Police has developed a dedicated manual and trained 70 officers to handle such cases more effectively.

A representative from the Ministry of Economy, Culture, and Innovation, stated that the ministry is leading on 27 measures under the Growth Plan. She noted that the ministry has begun drafting key legislation, including frameworks for public-private partnerships, as well as strategic documents and policies to support industrial development and transport, all aligned with the broader reform agenda. She also added that an assessment is underway to determine how Albania can improve its ranking within the OECD.

Daniel Prroni, Researcher at IDM, explained that the platform is designed to facilitate dialogue and align with the independent monitoring methodology employed by six countries, with the hope that Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) will also participate. He said that since the endorsement of the Reform Agenda last November, Albania has entered a new phase of its EU integration journey, one that is not only ambitious in scope, but also unprecedented in terms of the financial and political support it has mobilized. Under the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, Albania stands to receive up to EUR 922 million by 2027. The first pre-financing tranche of EUR 64.5 million has already been disbursed, marking a tangible start to this multi-year commitment. He also noted that some measures remain unfinished as the deadline approaches and emphasized that acceleration should not come at the expense of the quality of reforms. Additionally, he pointed out that some measures are difficult to assess due to the absence of quantitative indicators.

Erjon Muharremaj, Professor at the University of Tirana, provided statistical data regarding the number of judges and prosecutors who have been judged. He also emphasized that the appointment of judges should be conducted publicly, in accordance with the constitution. The judicial map represents the primary obstacle to successfully implementing the plan to improve judicial efficiency. Muharremaj also said that there are three different case management systems in use, which do not produce unified or reliable statistics.

Blerjana Bino, Executive Director of SCIDEV, stated that there are ongoing issues with transparency and accountability. She pointed out systemic limitations affecting freedom of speech, including persistent connections between the media and political interests. Bino emphasized that anti-SLAPP measures should protect everyone who speaks publicly. She also



noted that while the EU expects Albania to be a success story, significant challenges remain regarding the rule of law, democratic institutions, and related areas. Additionally, she mentioned that some cities lack local organizations due to a shortage of human resources.

The open discussion focused on the need for civil society to unite and develop a unified approach, particularly regarding elements of transparency.