

Albania and the European Union – No time to depart from the ‘carrot and stick’ approach

Corina Stratulat and Gjergji Vurmo

Last Sunday, Edi Rama – leader of the Socialist Party – was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of Albania after his party’s alliance won by a landslide (83 seats) against Sali Berisha’s Democratic Party and its coalition partners (57 seats) in June’s parliamentary vote. Rama’s investiture brings to an end the eight-year premiership of his opponent, Berisha, who will serve as a backbencher hereafter under the Democrats’ new chairman – Lulzim Basha. Equally importantly, it marks the peaceful resolution of a bitter and drawn-out political rivalry that has long stalled Albania’s progress on the reform agenda and its path towards the European Union.

The smooth handover of power, in combination with Albania’s recent strides to meet EU conditions, should help to reboot and upgrade the country’s relationship with the Union. To meet its end of the bargain, Brussels should now reciprocate by dovetailing the expected reward of ‘candidate status’ by the end of the year with a better calibrated conditionality for Albania.

The candidate status – a deserved ‘carrot’...

After two consecutive and firm ‘NOs’ to the country’s application in 2010 and 2011, the European Commission recommended Albania last October for a kind of conditional candidate status, provided that it adopted pending laws in the areas of the judiciary, public administration and parliamentary rules of procedure. The orderly conduct of this year’s general elections – in a country where every electoral contest since 1992 has failed to meet high international standards – then became a further hoop through which Albania was expected to jump in order to prove its democratic maturity and advance its membership bid.

The country completed the outstanding package of reforms in May and, despite an initial off-putting row involving its Central Electoral Commission, it also sailed through the June vote. These developments bring Albania broadly in line with the Brussels executive’s requirements for candidate status, and also put it half-way through the more general 12-priority list outlined by the European Commission back in November 2010. From the first part of this ‘to-do’ list, Albania has appointed an Ombudsman (December 2011), approved the Administrative Courts Law (May 2012), and amended its Constitution to scrap parliamentary immunity (September 2012). The infamous ‘critical mass’ of results ‘across the board’ coined by EU officials can therefore be said to have been reached, throwing the ‘ball’ into the Union’s ‘court’.

In response, the European Commission should make good on its commitment and recommend this autumn that the Council gives Albania, by the end of the year, the green light to become a candidate country. Fudging its way out of granting Albania this expected ‘carrot’ would undermine the credibility of the process. The EU’s leverage rests on its credibility. If the latter is compromised, so will Albania’s transformation prospects. Thus, continuing to ‘play for time’ might not only harm the EU’s capital of trust, but could also fly in the face of all attempts to maintain a steady momentum of reform in the country.

Given Albania’s change in government, the incentive of ‘candidate status’ could allow the new leadership to get off on the right foot in the eyes of the electorate. In turn, this could secure the country’s engagement with the integration project at a stage when such a commitment is essential in order to carry out the remaining work and,

especially, in order to follow through on reforms achieved in terms of implementation. In fact, a new chapter in EU-Albania relations – potentially opened with candidate status – would best correspond to the challenges left on the list of 12 key priorities, which mostly relate to the need to ensure that reforms take place not just on paper but also in practice.

...best served with a sharper ‘stick’

And if the country were to engage in preparations to begin accession negotiations, more than being an effective tool to avoid transformation fatigue and prevent the integration process from losing traction, ‘candidate status’ could give the EU an opportunity to revisit and update the list of priorities for Albania in a way that reflects a better balance between the clarity and scope of the conditions set.

The remaining six priorities – to strengthen the rule of law, the fight against corruption and organised crime, and the protection of human rights – are all substantive issues of ‘good governance’, as well as meaningful conditions in view of the Union’s founding principles and values. They are also important areas of reform for Albanian citizens, who signalled in the June vote a desire for change that they expect the new government to deliver on, and who, according to Transparency International, remain deeply distrustful of their political leaders.

But if these ‘big asks’ are to make a difference on the ground and translate into more than a formal law-adoption procedure of different associated measures, they should be broken down into concrete and measurable tasks that can effectively contribute towards meeting the overall objective. Vague and broad demands, backed by action plans that do not systematically and genuinely tackle the root problems in these areas, cannot be expected to have a real and lasting impact, no matter how laudable their intention.

For this reason, it is imperative that the Commission and the new Albanian government pay closer attention in devising the standards and instruments by which progress on each of these remaining conditions is judged, and that they subject any reforms adopted or new policies to performance screening. This does not mean that the list of requests should be extended. It merely entails that there should be more clarity and better quality control checks of the progress made by Albania in ticking off individual priorities.

As part of this strategy, the Commission should ask Albania to also strengthen its civil society – not just ‘political’ – dialogue. The participation of civil society organisations in their country’s membership effort from an early stage could improve the quality and delivery of necessary reforms. Moreover, it could help to improve civil society’s capacity and to set the groundwork of an effective government-civil society interaction, which, based on the Montenegrin experience, will be essential once Albania is ready to start EU accession talks. To this end, Brussels must push Albania to keep pace with the frontrunners in the Balkan region by establishing formal consultative joint structures and binding procedures of civil society involvement in policy and legislative processes at all levels.

The case of Albania highlights at present the fact that to keep the enlargement ball rolling, real engagement is needed both from the aspiring Balkan countries and the EU itself. The ‘carrot and stick’ policy remains a tried and tested approach – so will the Union now hold up its end of the deal?

Corina Stratulat is Policy Analyst at the European Policy Centre. Gjergji Vurmo is Policy Analyst at the Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Albania.