



**POLICY BRIEF** No 2019/10, MAY 2019

# **Albania's Accession in the EU: The Case of the Greek Minority**

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## **Key points**

Having acquired the candidate status for entering the European Union since 2014, Albania is among the countries most likely to become the new member states of the Union. However, this depends on Albania's respecting and applying a series of values common in the EU, such as the respect of the minorities. And, for all the progress made in this sector, there is still a lot to be done, mainly regarding the rights of the autochthonous Greek National Minority living in the country's southern part, a region known as "Northern Epirus". The issue is a stumbling block for the bilateral relations between Albania and Greece and the EU should take it into serious account whilst negotiating the entrance of Albania. After all, it is of utmost importance to take action, in order to ensure that all of the members of EU respect its citizens' rights.

This Policy Brief suggests:

- The conduct of a campaign regarding the matter
- The close observation of Albania's progress on this issue
- The voting of a resolution concerning the situation of the Greek Minority
- The examination by the EU bodies of the EU funding of the Greek minority
- The full accession of Albania into EU only after proven respect of the rights of the Greek Minority

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## Analysis

The Greek National Minority of Albania is the largest minority in the country, as acknowledged by the Albanian state, dating back to the pro-Christian era. In 1914, Albania had signed the Protocol of Corfu, which granted autonomy, among some other rights, to the Greeks of Northern Epirus. However, the Protocol has never been fully implemented, partly due to political circumstances. After World War II and the accession of the communist regime of Enver Hoxha, the Greek minority suffered from violent suffocation of their liberties. In the post-Cold War era, the violation of the rights of the Greek minority has been continued, although with lower tense than the past years. This situation has become a thorn to the Greek-Albanian relations, since Greece considers self as the kin-state of the minority, and has also granted the Greek citizenship to the homogenous Greeks of Albania.

In 2009, Albania applied for becoming a member of the European Union. The legal basis for the enlargement policy of the EU is Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union, while it is also crucial the values stated in Article 2 of the said Treaty to be respected as well. The case of Albania also lies in the Western Balkans Strategy, part of the Enlargement Policy. Currently, Albania possesses the candidate status for entering the EU.

In 2019, negotiations are about to start between EU and Albania to further the country's entrance process, while a "screening stage" will be running simultaneously. The European Commission will be informing the Council of the EU and the European Parliament about the progress of the candidate state; as far as the European Parliament is concerned, it may submit its conclusions about the Commission's annual reports. Yet, it is still questionable whether the country will manage to adopt the Community acquis, since it steadily refutes to fully respect and implement the treaties it has signed, regarding the rights of the Greek minority.

The people of the Greek National Minority in Albania live under the state of fear even after the fall of the communist regime and the establishment of democracy. Although their religious beliefs are no more suppressed by the state, like during Hoxha's atheistic reign, the Greek-Orthodox churches are still vandalised, under the indifferent eye of the Albanian governments. Greek minority are also murdered without any punishment, with most recent incident the killing under suspicious circumstances of a Greek expatriate during the Greek national celebration (28/10/2018) by the Albanian police<sup>1</sup>, which was

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P8-TA-2018-0481+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2019].



followed by the declaration of Greeks wanting to attend his funeral, including a Cypriot Member of the European Parliament, as *personae non gratae*.

In addition, there is also in progress a plan of expropriation of the seaside properties belonging to members of the Greek minority in Himarra, in order to exploit them for touristic purposes. Against the objections of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs<sup>2</sup>, its Albanian counterpart has answered by pleading diverting excuses<sup>3</sup>, coming from the laws of the communist era for abolishment of personal property.

Moreover, it should be mentioned that Albania denies to grant the minority status to the Greeks living anywhere in the country except for the so called “minority zones”, thus excluding a significant amount from the protection and the rights it would provide them with, especially regarding education in the mother tongue. Added to this, statistics and censuses are accused of passing down the number of the Greek minority population, in order to downplay its importance, while the latest census dates back to 1989.

All those infringements run counter not only to the said Protocol of Corfu, but also a series of other international conventions and pacts Albania has signed, e.g. the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, the Declaration of the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities etc. In addition to that, they totally contrast with the European values and morals, as stipulated with the so-called “Copenhagen criteria”.

Regarding the European Union, the issue is closely related to the enlargement policy of the Union, since Albania is a candidate state. The Albanian entry is part of the EU’s Strategy for the Western Balkans, an ambitious plan for the further accession of the Balkan peninsula in the Union. Taking into consideration that the Balkans are one of the most troubled regions of Europe, it is nothing but surprising the Union’s will and determination to cement peace and stability in its southeastern “neighbourhood” by integrating more and

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<sup>2</sup> Mfa.gr. (2018). *Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement on the decision by the government of Albania to cede plots of land belonging to members of the Greek National Minority - Announcements - Statements - Speeches*. [online] Available at: <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-statement-on-the-decision-by-the-government-of-albania-to-cede-plots-of-land-belonging-to-members-of-the-greek-national-minority.html> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2019].

<sup>3</sup> Ministria per Evropen dhe Punet e Jashtme. (2018). *Press statement of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs - Ministria per Evropen dhe Punet e Jashtme*. [online] Available at: <http://punetejashtme.gov.al/en/press-statement-of-the-ministry-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs/> [Accessed 9 Jan. 2019].



more Balkan states in the European family. As a matter of fact, Albania, with the urge and aid of the European Union, has made a notable breakthrough regarding the reforms in a wide range of fields. However, there is still a lot to be done; letting the supra-optimists, inside and outside the EU, to boost a country's accession before it fully complies with the necessary criteria and values would put the European construction, already struggling with populism, to a great risk.

## Recommendations

By stressing out all those parameters of this issue, this very policy brief aims at ensuring that the rights of the National Greek minority living in Albania will be totally respected and protected, and that the Albanian state will implement its international obligations, as signed in the treaties, to their full extent, before entering the European Union. For this purpose, it is proposed that:

1. A campaign will be held, inside the European Parliament, to inform the plenary of its members about this burning issue and how it relates to the EU, with members of the Greek minority invited to attend and draw the Members' of the European Parliament attention with the circumstances of living in their homeland
2. The process of accession of Albania will be closely monitored by the European parliament, especially regarding the issue of the Greek minority (and treatment of minorities in general)
3. A resolution to be proposed for voting, further to those adopted on the Commission's reports, greeting the progress of the Albanian government, but also pointing out the violations of the rights of the Greek minority and the need for them to come to an end
4. Audit, in cooperation with the European Commission, Albanian Parliament and any other institution involved, whether the Greek National Minority of Albania has an equal share of the European funds provided to the country, in framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy
5. The respect of the Greek National Minority will remain at the top of the agenda, and the accession of Albania will not ever be upvoted, before tangible evidence is given accordingly



## Conclusion

If adopted and implemented, the measures mentioned above are not only to vastly enhance the standard of living of the Greek minority, but they will also lead to a further democratisation and empowerment of the institutions in Albania. For that reason, it is important that the European Union makes clear to Albania and all candidate states to come, that the path to the European integration passes through the concrete respect of the rights and the special identities of the national minorities. The European Parliament in particular, as the voice of the people of Europe, has not only a legal, but also a moral obligation, to ensure that the enlargement procedure will screen out any governmental behaviour that would suppress the civilians' rights. Albania is an important strategic partner of the EU, and probably one of its next members, so it is crucial for all sides that it complies with the European *acquis* before its accession, in order to form a useful paradigm for the other countries of its region.



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