

Minutes of the Workshop

On the European Integration Partnership Platform (EIPP)

Held on: July, 13th, 2021, at Europe House, Tirana

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The European Integration Partnership Platform (EIPP) was established by the Albanian Government to provide regular and structured information on the EU accession process to the general public in a transparent manner. The Prime Minister Order 113/2019 enables the cooperation and involvement of civil society actors, private sector, academia, social partners, and other interest groups in informing, consulting and monitoring the accession negotiations process of the country. The SEI Project organized a workshop on EIPP in Tirana on July 13, 2021 aiming to present the work and support by SEI to the Platform; to contribute to the restart of the process for the establishment of Consultation and Discussion Tables in general; and to focus on how to make the best use of this instrument especially for the chapters of the Fundamentals Cluster.

Opening greetings were delivered by:

Mr. Sofjan Jaupaj, Office of the Chief Negotiator emphasized the relevance of the SEI project in Albania's path towards EU. He pointed out that EIPP is a distinct structure that enables the dialogue and interaction between state and non-state institutions. The Partnership Platform strives to gather the expertise of non-state actors to attain the objectives of the PKIE and draft strategic documents of EU integration process. The civil society, private sector, academia, social partners, and other interest groups ought to facilitate, monitor and guide the work required for the EU accession negotiation chapters indicating that this process is quite long and complex. Mr. Jaupaj mentioned that the Albanian governmental structures can change in the coming future but the main objective of the Discussion Tables is to establish steady and lasting mechanisms and efficient strategies that will engage all the above-mentioned parties will endure.

Mrs. Admira Jorgji, EU Directorate MEFA provided a short summary of the steps taken until now for the involvement of all stakeholders in the preparations for the negotiations and the implementation of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement. The Prime Minister Order 113/2019 foresaw the establishment of the European Integration Partnership Platform, through the set-up of the Partnership Roundtables for each of the European Integration Interinstitutional Working Groups. The Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs had instructed the IEIWGs to publish open calls for the participation of the non-state actors into the Partnership Roundtables. Immediately after the process was kick-started, the Partnership Tables have been set up by the EIIWG 23 and Political Criteria, 18, 22, 25 and 26. In general, there has been a relatively poor response for the set-up of the Partnership Roundtables due to many factors, ranging from the lack of visibility and the awareness raising for participating at the Partnership tables to poor interest shown by the other stakeholders as well as going through a pandemic. Lately, the Partnership Roundtables for the EIIWGs for which the Ministry of Finances and Economy has the lead, have

also been constituted. The task of negotiations will be enormous, she said and therefore more engagement of the other stakeholders was not only desirable but needed. She expressed full availability of the government structure for the accession negotiations towards requests for information and cooperation coming from the interested and engaged stakeholders.

Mr. Stefano Cominelli, *EU Delegation in Albania* stated that the SEI project is a substantial tool for Albania to carry on the process of joining the European Union. He said that the modus operandi is not devoted only to the political dialogue and therefore other stakeholders should strive to partake and contribute. By the same token, Mr. Cominelli asserted that the government should be transparent with the public and highlighted the significance of administrative capacity building. The negotiation process requires consistent feedback and the public administration should be competent to prioritize the given tasks.

Mr. Klaudijus Maniokas, *SEI Team Leader* mentioned that this project is supported by the European Union mostly to held preparations for the bilateral screening. The main aim is to conduct a quality check of bilateral screening tools and facilitate the drafting of strategic documents. He emphasized the relevance of the civil society and suggested that apart from workshops and consultations a more proactive way should be developed to fully engage these non-state actors in the EU accession process.

Mr. Gledis Gjipali, *SEI expert* explained the overall structure of the EI work in Albania which include the forthcoming negotiations between EU and Albania and the Stabilization and Association Process, NPEI and the IPA funds. Moreover, he added that EIPP intends to address the main issues that the civil society actors, the private sector, academia, social partners, and other interest groups may display during the roundtables. Gjipali confirmed that the groundwork for the upcoming trainings and informing sessions has been concluded. He added that GIZ-Saneca project has given a valuable contribution in the organization of the discussion and consultation roundtables regarding the economic chapters. There were no applications in the first round but currently 13 roundtables have been established, constituting more than 1/3 of the entire Platform. Moreover, the Selection Methodology has been designed in a manner that will clarify and assist the work of the roundtables.

The situation in the other chapters remains problematic as little efforts have been made recently to restart the process. A more detailed explanation of the Partnership Platform structured in two levels followed, focusing on the need to fully establish all 33 Tables in order to complete the governing board. The first level includes 33 roundtables where the participants will share their thoughts and recommendations. The second one is focused on the selection of the governing board where 2/3 of the members is proposed by members of the roundtables. Lastly, he mentioned that the government has taken special notice of the Platform given that the Prime Minister was appointed as the Chair of the Governing Board.

Adea Pirdeni, *Deputy Minister of Justice of the Republic of Albania* in her statement commented the role that the Ministry of Justice has had as a leading institution for Chapter 23, the Political

Criteria and the organization of the first roundtable. She mentioned that the official preparations have started since October 2020 and the notice and invitations to potential members and stakeholders were sent through virtual platforms. The results were discouraging due to the lack of interest. This Chapter includes the judiciary, fight against corruption and fundamental rights. The Deputy Minister explained that the evaluation process lasted few weeks and 11 applications were chosen to be part of the EIPP. The First Intergovernmental Conference and the bilateral meetings are expected to intensify the proceedings of the Partnership Platform. Ms. Pirdeni indicated that the ministries have limited capacities to handle all the challenges that may arise during this process. On a related note, she appreciated the cooperation between the Ministry of Justice and European Movement Albania within the Platform regarding the promotion of European values and providing expertise for state-institutions.

Vasilika Vjero, Deputy Minister at Ministry of Finance and Economy greeted the participants and said that the roundtables for Chapter 6 (Company Law), Chapter 16 (Taxation), Chapter 29 (Customs Union) and Chapter 32 (Financial Control) led by the Ministry of Finance and Economy were held on July 12, 2021. Ms. Vjero expressed the need for an online platform where all the members can have access to the documentation, official progress-reports and specific duties regarding the EIPP and the negotiation process as a whole. She pointed out that even though the SANECA project did not assist directly for the group formation, there were indirect contributions like info sessions, informative materials, and increase visibility that helped to set up the Tables. The process is quite complex and there is a high demand for a unified operating methodology. The Deputy minister declared that the instructions are not clear despite the fact that the meetings dedicated to each chapter are expected to start in a short period of time.

The representative of the Public Procurement Agency Mr. Geri Pilaca, in the name of Ms. Reida Kashta, Director of PPA, said that this workshop provides the right set of circumstances for the involved parties to exchange their experiences and provide guidance for better results. He informed that the Public Procurement Agency did the first online announcement regarding the EIPP in September and the second one in October but the interest was insufficient to establish the Consultation Table.

Genta Bektashi, from the Ministry of Internal Affairs expressed her concern about the technicalities of this process. She explained that the Ministry of Interior used two different methods to make the announcement. The first one was done online on the official webpage where there were 0 applications and the other by an official note sent to the stakeholders, as a result of which a database was created. In order to formalise this Group, the Ministry of Internal Affairs is planning to hold the roundtable for Chapter 24 in close cooperation with a CSO but the everything is still in the preparation phase. Ms. Bektashi asked for a well-structured manual that defines the role, function and expectancies of all the involved parties.

Juli Hoxha, Partners Albania, CSOs Sectors representatives, in her remarks said that the desire of the CSOs sector to participate is high but the guidance about the process as a whole and the

information about the EIPP is insufficient. She noted that the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs has dealt with the technical matters and has overlooked the CSO sector as such. Ms. Hoxha highlighted that it should not be taken for granted that the public is informed about the EIPP and the related strategies. There should be well-defined ways of making announcements about the roundtables. She explained that social media has been effective but it is not a trusted source of information. All the uncertainties regarding the procedures convert into a high level of scepticism. Bearing in mind the previous failures in consultation processes, Hoxha stated that the expectations for concrete outcomes are low. Considering the sensitivity of this matter for our country, the demand for transparency is substantial. She emphasized the need for international monitoring and said that for the moment they have decided to refrain from participating due to the above-mentioned reasons.

Artan Hoxha, Rector of the University of Tirana noted that the official decisions taken by the Council of Ministers regarding the EU integration process date back in 2018-2019 and since then the overall progress has been slow. He stated that the First Intergovernmental Conference is not a starting point but a continuation of Albania's efforts to join EU. Mr. Hoxha said that the government and the responsible institutions should be closer to academia. The selection process should be transparent in order to increase the trustworthiness of the stakeholders. He added that they have the expertise and capacities to assist the country towards EU integration and reminded the participants that the Justice reform was initiated and guided by this university. In order to achieve better results, the rector said that the Partnership Platform should include a larger number of High Education Institutions. He claimed that these roundtables and workshops are not enough if strict rules are not applied. According to Mr. Hoxha, people are not well-informed about the European Union, the advantages and disadvantages of the accession, the EIPP and other relevant elements.

Evis Dino, Secretary General of the Union of Chambers of Commerce & Industry of Albania, asserted that UCCIAL is part of the roundtables. She stated that the last two years have been difficult for the business sector due to the pandemic. Dino pointed out that it is mandatory for the government to draft a strategy that increases the involvement of this sector.

Kol Nikollaj, Chair, Confederation of Trade Unions Albania praised the organization of this workshop and added that non-state actors should take responsibility and willingness to participate and get informed about the EU integration process. He explained that the Confederation has applied for a total of five chapters: Chapter 2 (Free movement of workers), Chapter 3 (Right of establishment and freedom to provide services), Chapter 20 (Enterprise and industrial policy), Chapter 28 (Consumer and health protection), Chapter 33 (Financial and Budgetary provisions). He said that the consultation process is the most relevant step for the syndicates. Mr. Nikollaj emphasized the need for a better coordination between the Ministry of Justice and the Confederation. He added that the syndicates are connected to different sectors and can provide expertise in respective fields. In conclusion, he informed the participants that the Confederation of Syndicates has a specific entity that deals with the EU integration.

Agron Haxhimali, Executive Director at Association of Albanian Municipalities said that the process is complex and almost 70% of Acquis impacts the municipalities therefore these entities should have a proactive role in the accession negotiation process. Haxhimali pointed out that when it comes to the relation between the central government and municipalities, the formal part is covered but there is a lot of difficulties with putting things into practice. Moreover, he said that the capacity building process needs to continue with an increased control and the duties and objectives should be regulated by formal rules. He mentioned that Albania is not the best example to be taken when it comes to the efforts that the municipalities show. Mr. Haxhimali added that all actors should unite and work towards EU accession because the process affects everyone.

Open Discussion:

Florian Xhafa, SEI Expert talked about the relevance of the EIPP and the role of the non-state actors in the EU negotiation process. He stated that the EU integration of Albania goes beyond political parties and terms. Xhafa asserted that the government should provide road-maps for the harmonization of the EU Acquis with the national legislation. He explained that the Acquis adaptation has policy choices, therefore the stakeholders and the chosen members should get involved and represent their own interests in the political decisions. They should use their expertise and background knowledge to provide solutions and options for optimal results. Xhafa added that members need to get familiar with the Acquis and prepare before joining the discussions and roundtables.

Edison Hoxha, Center for Labour Rights, talked about Chapter 19 (Social Policy and employment) mentioning that the preparations have started on November 5, 2019. He said that state institutions should be held responsible for the occurring delays during this process. Moreover, Mr. Hoxha added that the EIPP should continue working with the already formed groups and not expand with other actors without making the Platform fully functional.

The discussions continued with questions and recommendations regarding the technical aspects of the Partnership Platform and the duties of the Governing Board. As a conclusion, Mr. Maniokas mentioned that a web-page is being developed by the Project and could be used as a space where all the related information and documents of the EIPP can be found.

Summary of Key Issues and follow up

Following the discussion of the workshop several issues have to be noted:

- Raising awareness and engage in the Platform of relevant stakeholders for the Chapters where the Tables are not yet established;
- Limited capacities in the Ministries and other institutions to support the process;
- Need for a unified operating methodology as instructions are not clear despite the fact that the meetings dedicated to each chapter are expected to start in a short period of time;
- Insufficient interest in some chapters from the stakeholders to apply;
- Cooperation with CSOs facilitates both the establishment and organization of the Tables meetings;
- Information and invitations to the Tables needs also formal channels not only social media;
- Bearing in mind the previous failures in consultation processes, the expectations from the CSOs sector for concrete outcomes are low;
- Considering the sensitivity of this matter for our country, the demand for transparency is substantial which could be supported with international monitoring;
- Need for a documentation center for the Platform (digital repository)
- Accademia could be a good source of expertise for the EU integration process;
- Syndicates are connected to different sectors and can provide expertise in respective fields;
- Business sector needs to be included through the adaption of the strategic documents by the government;
- Better regulation of the tasks and role of the local government contribution and engagement in the process;
- Acquis adaptation has policy choices to be made, therefore the stakeholders and the chosen members should get involved and represent their own interests in the political decisions;
- Members of the Tables need to get familiar with the Acquis and prepare before joining the discussions and roundtables.

Next steps in support of EIPP

SEI project in the coming months will:

- **prepare proposals for guidelines and offer capacity building support to non-state actors;**
- **offer ad hoc support in establishing round tables in specific chapters, fundamentals in particular;**
- **propose to re-start the round of announcements in September informing all key non state actors, as there was an understanding that a more pro-active approach is necessary;**
- **organize a conference in September where we can return to the issue once more by dedicating a special session;**
- **create a dedicated web space within the project website to include documentation of the IEPP legislation, rules, works and even recommendations produced by each table.**