

Albania and EU CFSP: Strengthening Integration

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ABSTRACT: Albania, an EU candidate country since 2014, is often described as already a member of Europe, only missing the ‘U’ of Union, owing not only to its geographic position, but also to its deep-rooted European sentiment. Albania’s foreign policy is, in no small degree, testimony to this. The article at hand examines Albania’s alignment with the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). Specifically, it assesses the degree of Albania’s alignment with EU CFSP and its implications for the country’s EU integration process, particularly in the context of the evolving geopolitical landscape. The analysis draws on Albania’s efforts regarding regional and international cooperation, international restrictive measures alignment, hybrid threats and Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI), and the latest 2024 European Commission Communication on EU enlargement policy. These efforts bear high significance for Albania’s EU integration process and underscore the increasing importance of CFSP alignment in the current geopolitical landscape. Albania’s case also offers critical insights into broader dynamics of EU enlargement and confirms that effective CFSP implementation is characterized by a varying degree of flexibility and autonomy.

KEYWORDS: Albania; EU enlargement; CFSP alignment; Common Foreign and Security Policy; Common Security and Defence Policy; Cluster 6 External Relations; Chapter 31 of the EU acquis.

INTRODUCTION: FROM COMMUNIST ISOLATION TO EUROATLANTIC INTEGRATION

“Once, you were a dark, closed door. But now, it’s an open door.”
Bill Clinton, speech in Tirana, July 3, 2023

Albania, located in Southeastern Europe, has firmly positioned itself on the path toward European Union (EU) membership, a central priority of its foreign policy. Alongside this goal, Albania’s foreign policy also focuses on regional cooperation, and distancing the Balkans from the instability of the past. Having endured and overcome one of the most repressive and isolated communist regimes in history (Szablowski, 2022: 133), Albania’s journey toward democracy and European integration has been driven by a deep desire for stability, development, and normalization in line with Western values. While the legacy of Enver Hoxha’s regime, the “iron fist of Albania” (Fevziu, 2016) from 1944 until his death in 1985, has influenced the country’s collective memory, Albania is today a country far removed from its communist past. Its post-communist trajectory is defined by its aspiration to integrate into European and transatlantic institutions -evoking Kissinger’s reflection on the perpetual transit in societies navigating between the memory of their past and the aspirations that define their future evolution (Kissinger, 2022).

Following the death of Hoxha and the collapse of the communist regime, Albania experienced a profound transformation.¹ In 1991, following the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, Albania held its first multi-party elections, ushering in new era. In spite of the instability of the 1990s -which reached its peak in the 1997 mayhem following the collapse of the economy as a consequence of pyramid schemes (Abrahams, 2015; Jarvis, 2000)-, the country’s foreign policy pivoted resolutely from isolationism to integration (Panagiotou, 2011; van Egeraat, 2016), with Albania aligning itself firmly with Europe, and describing itself as a European nation in the “most Western sense” (Maillard, 2024: 2).

Since 1991, Albania’s foreign policy has undergone a dramatic shift, moving away from the isolationism of the past, confronting what has been considered “the perils of change” (Rakipi, 2021), and advancing towards a future firmly embedded in the Euro-Atlantic community. Its pro-EU sentiment, cross-cutting through all segments in society and political parties (Kosho & Zotaj, 2022; Nexhipi & Nexhipi, 2019), stands out as a unifying factor that transcends party lines and ideological divides, setting it apart from other countries in the region (Gjinko, 2020; Maleshevich, 2024; Košťál & Klicperová-Baker, 2015; Stratulat et al., 2014). Being also one of the most pro-US countries owing to a combination of historical, political and cultural factors,² Albania’s commitment to its

¹ Such transformation is reflected in the demographic growth of the Tirana prefecture: 873,000 residents in 2023, and approximately 255,000 in 1991, according to INSTAT, Albania’s national statistics agency (2023).

² 72% of Albanians approved of US leadership, topping the list in Gallup poll conducted in 2017 (Loschky, 2017). The historical roots of this strong pro-US stance, and of the close Albanian-US relations, predate Albanian independence, owing to pro-Albanian patriotic movements and the foundation of the first Albanian Orthodox Church in the US in the early 20th century (Vickers, 1999). Also noteworthy was President Wilson’s support for Albanian statehood in the early 20th century, fostering considerable respect for the US among Albanians (Bardhaj, 2020), and the US’ support to Albania in other critical moments in its history (e.g. fall of communism, 1997 crisis). As a close US ally, Albania has found itself at the forefront of confronting Iranian-sponsored terrorism, hosting the MEK (Shay, 2020), and suffering massive cyberattacks attributed to Iran. Recent research on Albanian public opinion regarding the US role in the Israel-Gaza conflict reveals complex dynamics influenced by demographic factors: while age significantly

“Euro-Atlantic allegiance”, as well as to stabilization and development in the Western Balkans, has made it a reliable ally in an increasingly uncertain global environment (Maillard, 2024: 2), and a factor of stability in a region which is geopolitically strategic to both the EU and the US (Metushaj, 2018).

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION

Albania’s integration into international organizations has been a critical axis of its post-communist foreign policy strategy, joining most of them in the 1990s and 2000s, thus marking its return to the global stage after decades of isolation. While Albania joined the United Nations in 1955 and certain specialized agencies,³ it was the fall of communism that paved the way towards a new era of integration in international organizations. It has been a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) since 1991 and chaired the OSCE for the first time in 2020. Albania became a member of the Council of Europe in 1995, joining this European organization focused on promoting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In 2009, Albania further solidified its Euro-Atlantic aspirations by becoming a full member of NATO, underpinning its commitment to regional stability and the transatlantic security architecture and bargain (Sloan, 2016). Also in 2009, Albania submitted its application for EU membership and was granted EU candidate status by the European Council in 2014. In 2020, after the European Commission presented the new enlargement methodology, the Council of the EU decided to open accession negotiations.⁴ In 2021, Albania was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the 2022-2023 term, marking yet another milestone in its diplomacy. This was the first time Albania served on the Security Council, highlighting its growing role in global peace and security affairs. Albania has also demonstrated its commitment to human rights on the global stage, when it served a successful mandate on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) from 2015-2017,⁵ and was re-elected for the 2024-2026 term. In 2024, Albania was elected to the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice for the period 2025-2028, and to the Executive Board of UN Women for the term 2025-2027.

affects understanding and assessment of the US role, gender and religious faith notably influence pro/anti-American sentiments among Albanians (Tomja & Dumani, 2024). In contemporary times, Albania’s flexible foreign policy includes maintaining strong relations with the US while pursuing EU membership and fostering ties with other nations (Lami & Xharo, 2021).

³ In 1957, Albania became a member of International Atomic Energy Agency and in 1958 it joined UNESCO, with the country currently serving as a member of the UNESCO Executive Board for 2023-2027. Albania has been elected to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) for the terms 2005–2007 and 2013–2015. In 2013, Albania served as Vice-President of ECOSOC. The country has announced its candidacy for ECOSOC membership for the 2028–2030 term, with elections scheduled for 2027. The International Organization for Migration has been operationally present in Albania since 1992, while Albania became an IOM member state in 1993. Ministria për Evropën dhe Punët e Jashtme. Albania and international organizations. See <https://punetejashtme.gov.al/en/newsrooms/organizatat-nderkombetare/>

⁴ In March 2020, the European Council endorsed the General Affairs Council’s decision to open accession negotiations, and in July 2020 the draft negotiating framework was presented to the Member States. See https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/enlargement-policy/albania_en

⁵ As a member of the Human Rights Council during the term 2015-2017, Albania contributed to global commitments on the rights of national minorities, intolerance and discrimination, gender equality and women’s empowerment, and the rights of groups at risk. See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/03/human-rights-council-concludes-high-level-segment-and-starts-general-segment#:~:text=As%20a%20member%20of%20the,of%20groups%20at%20risk%20because>

Regional cooperation is also a strategic priority of Albania's foreign policy (Jano et al., 2018). This commitment is evident in Albania's leadership role within different regional initiatives it has successfully chaired over the past years. Through its active participation in such regional initiatives and organizations, Albania has consistently demonstrated its commitment to promoting peace, stability, and cooperation in the region. Thus, aiming to shift its position from a security recipient to a contributor to regional security, it is recognized as a stabilizing force in the region (Jano et al., 2018). These efforts highlight the country's leadership and solidarity with the region's EU integration objectives while elevating its status as a key regional actor and reliable partner.

During its rotating presidency of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) from December 2023 to June 2024,⁶ Albania prioritized advancing initiatives to strengthen economic collaboration, enhance interconnectivity, and promote transport and energy cooperation. Additional focus areas included fostering tourism and cultural exchange, deepening the partnership between BSEC and the European Union, and addressing common challenges faced by member states. These efforts were strategically designed to support sustainable development and advance regional integration across the Black Sea region.

As a founding member of the U.S.-Adriatic Charter (A5), Albania continues to play a pivotal role in this defense initiative, which is primarily aimed at promoting NATO membership and cooperation for Western Balkan countries. Beginning January 1, 2024, Albania assumed the one-year presidency of the U.S.-Adriatic Charter Partnership Commission. This initiative, characterized by its regional security focus, has provided Albania with a platform to advocate for key priorities, including its support to open doors policy for A5 membership in the Charter.⁷ Through its leadership, Albania underscores its commitment to strengthening regional security and fostering closer integration within Euro-Atlantic structures.

A member of the Central European Initiative (CEI) since 1996, in January 2024 Albania assumed the CEI Presidency, and organized the Ministerial meeting in Tirana in November 2024. Albania's presidency of CEI is centered on advancing European integration, fostering cultural and tourism cooperation, addressing pressing health policy challenges, and enhancing parliamentary engagement through the promotion of the CEI Parliamentary Convention framework (Central European Initiative, 2024a). A key focus is on strengthening interpersonal and institutional collaboration by facilitating partnerships among local governments, academic institutions, non-governmental organizations, and cultural and professional bodies. In addition, Albania has demonstrated unwavering support for CEI member initiatives aimed at assisting Ukraine in addressing the profound repercussions of the Russian aggression. In this context, Albania remains steadfast in its commitment to endorsing and contributing to future proposals within the CEI Cooperation Fund to sustain meaningful support for Ukraine (Central European Initiative, 2024b; Central European Initiative 2024c).

Under the motto "Shaping Our European Future," Albania's Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEEC) Chairmanship-in-Office for 2024-2025 is centered on promoting key regional priorities. These include fostering stability, enhancing

⁶ Albania assumed the rotating presidency of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation for the period January-June 2024.

⁷ Albania assumed the one-year presidency of the US-Adriatic Charter Partnership Commission (A5) on January 1, 2024. This presidency culminated with the Meeting of the Albanian Chairpersonship of the US-Adriatic Charter Partnership Commission (A5), held in Tirana on December 13, 2024.

interconnectivity and transport, advancing tourism and cultural exchange, strengthening health and security cooperation, driving economic growth, and supporting EU integration efforts.⁸ Through this agenda, Albania aims to reinforce regional collaboration and pave the way for a more integrated and prosperous Southeast Europe.

Moreover, the country plays an active role in addressing regional challenges, including migration, organized crime, and human trafficking, through collaborative initiatives with neighbours and EU agencies, as noted by Albania's Presidency (July 2024-June 2025) of the Migration, Asylum, Refugees Regional Initiative (MARRI).⁹ Albania has also hosted regional cultural events and supported initiatives like the Western Balkans Fund (WBF), promoting regional cultural, scientific, and educational exchanges.¹⁰ The WBF headquartered in Tirana, is an international organization established by the governments of the Western Balkans as a regionally-driven initiative for fostering cooperation through support to small- and medium-scale projects in several key focus areas, promoting regional connectivity and mutual understanding. Similarly, the Regional Youth Cooperation Office (RYCO) also has its headquarters in Tirana, fostering youth cooperation and reconciliation across the Western Balkans (Regional Youth Cooperation Office, 2017)

Significant steps have also been made through top-level summitry to strengthen Albania's role in the region with regard to alignment with CFSP, and EU integration at large. Tirana has hosted key international events, including notably the EU-Western Balkans Summit of 6 December 2022 (Council of the European Union, 2022a), the first of such summits in history, at the level of Heads of State or Government, to have taken place outside of the territory of the EU. Moreover, the EU-Albania Stabilisation and Association Council (SA Council) held its twelfth meeting on 16 March, 2023, in Tirana -the first time the SA Council was convened in Albania, "underlining the European Union's unequivocal commitment to the EU integration of the Western Balkans and to the accession negotiation process of Albania", in the words of the joint press statement (Council of the European Union, 2023a). Additionally, Albania hosted the mentioned Southeast Europe Summit and the regional summit on the Growth Plan for the Western Balkans in February 2023 (European Commission, 2024d); the Berlin Process Leaders Summit on 16 October 2023 (Berlin Process, 2023), culminating Albania's Presidency of the Berlin Process marked by a comprehensive calendar of ministerial meetings throughout the year (Berlin Process, 2023), and most recently, the inauguration ceremony for the College of Europe campus in Tirana (European Commission, 2024b), alongside European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, and Rector Federica Mogherini. In her address to the students at the College of Europe's Tirana Campus, President von der Leyen highlighted the significant geostrategic moment at which the campus opens, following the ones in Bruges and Natolin:

Once again, we are at a watershed moment for Europe. And once again, our family is preparing for a reunification. It could bring together all the people living between the Adriatic and the Black Sea. Just last week, for instance, Albania's accession negotiations to join our Union have entered a new phase. Together, we opened the cluster on

⁸ Albania took over the Chairmanship of the South-East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) for the term spanning July 2024 to June 2025.

⁹ Albania undertook the Presidency of the Initiative of Asylum, Migration, and Refugees for the period spanning July 2024 to June 2025.

¹⁰ WBF's two most recent initiatives in these categories include a training program on diplomatic communication skills and an event uniting Teqball federations from across the region. See Western Balkans Fund (2024a and 2024b).

fundamentals. It is at this decisive time that the beautiful city of Tirana welcomes the College of Europe. This is the vanguard of European integration (Von der Leyen, 2024).

By and large, these achievements reflect Albania's active role in promoting security, human rights, and democratic values, both regionally and globally. They also underscore how far Albania has come since the fall of communism -in spite of the lingering challenges, in particular with regard to corruption and organized crime (Jusufi, 2017; Fischer, 2019). President Clinton alluded to this point recently, suggesting that Albanians "built something truly commendable", "setting an example... and that example will inspire others to follow" (...) "You cannot be perfect, but you can be on the right side of history and on the right side of humanity" (Clinton, 2023).

THE INCREASING RELEVANCE OF CFSP FOR ENLARGEMENT

While literature has indicated a historical trend in the EU to use enlargement in wartime as a stabilization and security-building mechanism (Anghel & Džankić, 2023), EU expansion efforts have been clearly revived as a consequence of the war in Ukraine (Makul & Kalamujić, 2024). In a deteriorated European security context, the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), encompassing the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), has clearly gained increased traction and importance in the enlargement process (Higashino, 2004).

The requirement for ex ante alignment with the *acquis communautaire*, inherently embedded in the Copenhagen criteria established by the European Council in 1993 (Hillion, 2004; Schimmelfennig, 2008), serves as a fundamental principle guiding the enlargement negotiations, also in the fields of CFSP and CSDP. However, despite the arguable consideration that the obligation to align with EU norms in CFSP/CSDP may be stronger for candidate countries than for EU members, the absence of formal enforcement mechanisms in these fields allows candidates greater flexibility in shaping the relevant policies (Hillion, 2017). This flexibility, while providing short-term autonomy, may potentially complicate full alignment with EU standards, the European Commission's annual progress reports consistently outlining the Union's expectations for early alignment with its foreign policy framework. These reports play a crucial role in assessing each candidate's adherence to EU foreign policy principles and identifying areas where further progress is needed (Hillion, 2017: 3). Thus, effective CFSP implementation is characterized by a certain degree of flexibility and autonomy, and reflects, in no small measure, political culture and citizens' support (Koutrakos, 2017; Lampinen & Uusikylä, 1998).

In any case, and even if CFSP is often perceived as intergovernmental and non-binding, it produces, in theory and in practice, principles and norms that are intended to be complied with (Wessel, 2015; Saurugger & Terpan, 2015). Despite limited judicial enforcement, CFSP norms are not entirely soft and can have a committing nature (Wessel, 2015). Compliance with these norms at the domestic level is influenced by diverse factors such as sanctions, veto players, financial stakes, and normative distance between European and national rules (Saurugger & Terpan, 2015). The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force on 1 December 2009, further integrated CFSP into the EU's legal order, raising new questions about its legality and judicial review (Wessel, 2021). Moreover, while the Court of Justice of the European Union has limited jurisdiction over CFSP, recent case law has interpreted this jurisdiction broadly, adopting an integrationist approach (Wessel, 2021; Koutrakos, 2017).

ALBANIA'S CFSP ALIGNMENT: A BROAD PERSPECTIVE

Albania's consistent alignment throughout time with the EU's CFSP sends a strong signal of the country's strategic commitment to EU membership. While such alignment has received renewed attention as the EU seeks to strengthen its geopolitical position in the Western Balkans in the context of the war in Ukraine, it is noteworthy that this has been ongoing for years, driven more by political identity (Cardwell & Moret, 2023), and socialization mechanisms, rather than by external incentives (Spurná, 2021; Juncos & Pomorska, 2006). Albania has been publicly supporting and adhering to EU statements on international matters such as conflicts, sanctions, human rights, and global diplomacy. Albania's pursuit of EU integration through security cooperation is responsive to the EU's strategy to maintain stability in its periphery counter external influences (Lami, 2020). Albania's alignment efforts with the EU CFSP indeed go back more than a decade -e.g., 2012 Agreement for establishing a framework for the participation of Albania in the EU crisis management operations; 2016 Agreement on the security procedures for the exchange of classified information-, but it was during preparations for the EU screening process in 2019 after the European Commission recommended opening accession negotiations, that significant progress was made in harmonizing its legislation with EU CFSP standards.

The 2024 European Commission Communication on EU enlargement policy presented a comprehensive evaluation of Albania's progress (European Commission, 2024a), highlighting its ongoing active participation in political discussions with the EU on foreign and security policy matters. Albania demonstrated complete alignment (100%) with the EU's statements by the High Representative, and Council decisions on CFSP, including all EU sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine (COM, 2024: 93). This is in stark contrast with the positions maintained by other EU candidate countries -e.g., Serbia (Vulović, 2023)- and is consistent with the traditional assessment by literature that '[n]orms are not important because they create harmony ... but because they help us to recognize cleavages and conflicts in a society' (Hall & Kratochwil, 1993: 487–488).

The EU currently enforces more than 40 distinct sanctions regimes. While some of these are implemented in compliance with mandates from the UN Security Council, others are independently established by the EU (European Commission, n.d.). Albania has consistently aligned itself with a broad range of EU decisions and statements in the field over the years. This alignment is evident in Albania's full endorsement of EU declarations, imposition of sanctions against Russia, and support for relevant UN General Assembly resolutions (Hleba, 2019). These include the implementation of targeted measures to combat terrorism (European Union, 2024a), the promotion and protection of human rights (Council of the European Union, 2024a; Council of the European Union, 2024b), support for EU statements addressing Russia's ongoing hybrid activities against the Union, and its Member States (Council of the European Union, 2024c), as well as the enforcement of sanctions against the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (European Union, 2024b). In this sense, Albania has actively contributed to international forums, in line with EU positions, including notably the imposition of restrictive measures, and sanctions against Russia (Cardwell & Moret, 2023), aligning with all 14 package of restrictive measures targeting key industries of the Russian economy, individual sanctions, diplomatic measures, and visa measures (Council of the European Union, 2024d). The sanctions reflect the EU's geopolitical considerations in responding to Russia's military aggression against Ukraine (Meissner, 2023). By aligning with these measures, including sanctions targeting Belarus (Council of the European Union, 2024e) due to its role in

supporting the aggression, Albania demonstrates its commitment to shared values, and its alignment with EU foreign policy priorities.

While some of these alignments pertain to issues or regions that may seem distant or less immediately relevant to Albania, they have significantly influenced the country's foreign policy orientation. Albania's alignment in multilateral fora, such as the OSCE, reflects a broader trend of non-EU states supporting EU declarations (Marciacq & Sanmartín J, 2015); this diplomatic alignment is influenced by various factors, including contractual obligations, socialization, and rational decision-making (Marciacq, 2011). It could be argued that steadfast adherence to EU positions has provided a strong foundation for Albania's election as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, and its current role on the Human Rights Council, enhancing its international profile and diplomatic credibility. Be that as it may, the European Commission's readiness to support the Albanian government's goal of opening Cluster 6, "External Relations," by the end of 2024,¹¹ is seen as a very positive development (Prime Minister's Office of Albania, 2024a). And Albania remains clearly committed to accelerating its accession negotiations and aims to open additional clusters by the end of 2025 (Rama, 2024).

In the current geopolitical landscape, solidarity with Ukraine has been demonstrated not only through alignment with the implementation of restrictive measures, but also through high-level diplomatic engagements. Particularly salient was the Ukraine-Southeast Europe Summit, held in Tirana on 28 February, 2024, with President Volodymyr Zelensky attending as guest of honor. Albania once again showcased its leadership and solidarity by hosting this summit, where regional leaders issued a united declaration condemning Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine (Prime Minister's Office of Albania, 2024b). This event marked another symptom of Albania's active role in fostering regional cooperation and solidarity with Ukraine. The declaration reaffirmed unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders and committed to providing sustained assistance to achieve a comprehensive and just peace, aligned with the UN Charter and Ukraine's Peace Formula. The summit highlighted the need to return unlawfully deported Ukrainian children, combat misinformation and hybrid warfare, and strengthen cybersecurity. Participants also committed to Ukraine's post-war recovery, prioritizing reconstruction, demining efforts, and economic revitalization through international partnerships. The declaration concluded with a shared belief in unity as essential for restoring peace, stability, and prosperity in Europe.

INTERNATIONAL RESTRICTIVE MEASURES IMPLEMENTATION

An important element of CFSP alignment is effective implementation of the international restrictive measures, which in Albania is legally enforced through the adoption of Law No. 72/2019, "On International Restrictive Measures in the Republic of Albania", and Law No. 157/2013 "On the measures against terrorism financing". The latter is aimed at preventing and combating terrorist activities, as well as targeting individuals involved in financing terrorism or those reasonably suspected of engaging in, planning, or supporting such acts. This is achieved through the freezing and confiscation of their assets and properties, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions (Law no. 157/2013, 2013;

¹¹ "The Commission also supports the opening of negotiations on cluster 6 – External Relations towards the end of the year if the positive trend continues", p. 22 of Communication From The Commission To The European Parliament, The Council, The European Economic And Social Committee And The Committee Of The Regions 2024 Communication on EU enlargement policy, 30.10.2024.

Financial Intelligence Unit of Albania, 2024), the actions of international organizations, and the international agreements to which Albania is a party (Law no. 72/2019, 2019a). The former law established a revised legal framework for EU and UN sanctions, thereby streamlining and strengthening the country's efforts to secure a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2022–2023 term (Cardwell & Moret, 2023: 9). Law 72/2019 “On International Restrictive Measures in the Republic of Albania” was designed to implement global sanctions aimed at “preservation of peace and security, the prevention of international conflicts, the support and strengthening of democracy, the rule of law, and human rights, as well as the achievement of other common security objectives, in accordance with the relevant resolutions of the United Nations Security Council, the acts of other international organizations, or the international agreements to which the Republic of Albania is a party as well as this law” (Law no. 72/2019, 2019b). Therefore, the implementation of these sanctions is based upon:

- Resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council;
- Binding decisions of other international organizations of which Albania is a member;
- European Union regulations;
- Article 9 of the Law.¹²

This law provides for the establishment of the Committee on International Restrictive Measures, composed of senior management representatives of bodies responsible for: foreign affairs, domestic affairs, finances, economy, agriculture, transport, energy, defence, justice, the General Prosecution's Office, the Special Prosecution Office against Corruption and Organized Crime, the State Intelligence Service, the Bank of Albania, the Commissioner for Protection of Personal Data, the Albanian National Security Authority, and may involve any representatives of other competent bodies on a case by case basis.

At the First Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) on EU Accession in July 2022, Albania reiterated its dedication to aligning with the CFSP positions and declarations, demonstrating its strategic approach to foreign policy and its commitment to advancing its EU integration goals (Council of the European Union, 2022b). Since that first IGC, Albania has consistently reaffirmed its commitment to engaging in political dialogue with the EU on foreign and security policy issues. This dedication is exemplified by the adoption of the EU-Albania Security and Defence Partnership on November 19, 2024, which establishes a framework for enhanced cooperation in addressing shared security challenges.¹³ Additionally, Albania has maintained full alignment with the EU's CFSP decisions and declarations, according to the Commission's progress report (European Commission, 2024b). In practical terms, Albania's alignment with EU foreign policy positions involves a clearly defined procedural framework. Upon receiving an invitation to align with EU positions—whether related to decisions by the European Commission on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) or declarations issued by the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy—via AGORA, the EU's data-sharing platform (European Commission, 2024c), the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (MEFA) initiates a structured internal process. This process begins with the

¹² Article 9 of Law No. 72/2019 specifies international restrictive measures with a domestic nature, imposed by the Republic of Albania on entities or persons that endanger or undermine the constitutional order, the national security of the Republic of Albania, and violate its international obligations.

¹³ As noted by the new security and defence partnership with the EU to strengthen capabilities and cooperation.

communication being circulated to the relevant department responsible for the corresponding geographic or thematic area. Subsequently, it is reviewed by the Director General before being escalated to the political level, where the Deputy Minister evaluates and provides formal political alignment. Following this step, the alignment request is submitted to the Committee on International Restrictive Measures for further deliberation and approval, before sending their recommendation to the Council of Ministers for approval.

This process gained considerable momentum following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. While Albania has maintained a steady alignment with the EU's restrictive measures in recent history, including those introduced against Russia after its annexation of Crimea in 2014, the escalation of Russia's actions with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 prompted a significant expansion of the EU's sanctions regime, resulting in an increased number of alignment requests. Albania responded swiftly, fully adhering to the EU's CFSP decisions and declarations, including the newly adopted measures targeting Russia and Belarus (Council of the European Union, 2023b). As part of this alignment, Albania has engaged in various initiatives to enhance its implementation of sanctions and counterterrorism measures. For instance, seminars on the implementation of sanctions were conducted in collaboration with TAIEX, DG FISMA, and EU Member States. Further demonstrating its commitment, members of the Committee on International Sanctions participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program on sanctions implementation and export controls in the United States in 2023. Placing this cooperation between NATO membership and EU candidacy at the forefront of its foreign policy and national security reflects Albania's natural position within the European Union.

The effectiveness and judicial control of these sanctions remains subjects of ongoing study (Matusiak-Fraczak, 2024). But an analysis of the implementation of the sanctions regime in Albania is relevant, considering Albania's position outside the decision-making framework for the establishment of these sanctions, and confirms support of EU sanctions by non-EU states from the region (Cardwell & Moret, 2023); as well as the existence of significant degrees flexibility and autonomy in CFSP implementation (Hillion, 2017), especially in comparison with the varying degree of implementation by other states from the region; and the key importance of political culture for such implementation (Koutrakos, 2017; Lampinen & Uusikylä, 1998).

ALBANIA PARTICIPATION IN THE EU CSDP

Albania has consistently affirmed its strong support for the European Union's Global Strategy, fully endorsing its ambitious objectives and advocating for an enhanced role of the Union in global affairs.¹⁴ Moreover, the country remains firm in its commitment to the EU Strategic Compass, actively contributing to European Union missions and operations through increased engagement and contributions.¹⁵ Since the adoption of the

¹⁴ In addition to the EU Commission's report on Albania acknowledging the country's progress in aligning with EU policies, including those related to foreign and security affairs, in 2022, EU High Representative Josep Borrell, in his address to the United Nations Security Council, praised Albania for its valuable contributions to the UN and its progress toward EU membership. He emphasized the critical role of cooperation with dependable partners like Albania in promoting peace and security. See European External Action Service (n.d.).

¹⁵ Albania's 2024 National Security Strategy emphasizes the vital role of collaboration with allies and partners, particularly the EU, in addressing transnational challenges. This approach aligns with the EU's

Strategic Compass, Albania has acknowledged and welcomed the EU's sustained recognition of the Western Balkans as a strategic priority and a key partner. This alignment reflects Albania's dedication to fostering regional stability and advancing its integration into the broader framework of European security and defense cooperation. Albania has maintained active participation in EU military crisis management missions under CSDP, including its ongoing role in EUFOR Althea in Bosnia and Herzegovina (European External Action Service [EEAS]), and committed to expanding Albania's presence in the KFOR mission (Ministry of Defence of Albania, 2022). The country also contributes to regional defense cooperation through the Balkan Medical Task Force (BMTF), a multinational medical military unit composed of contributions by the participating nations from the region¹⁶. Moreover, in March 2023, Albania actively participated in the inaugural edition of the Schuman Security and Defence Forum.¹⁷

Albania's engagement with the EU's CSDP is characterized by a series of formal agreements and cooperative frameworks that underscore its commitment to regional security and European integration. In 2012, Albania affirmed its dedication to contributing to EU-led crisis management operations by signing the Framework Participation Agreement (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2024a). This marked a significant step in its integration into CSDP missions, and its broader commitment to European security initiatives. Building on this, in 2016 Albania and the EU adopted an agreement governing the secure exchange of classified information. This arrangement facilitates robust cooperation on sensitive security matters, reflecting Albania's role as a reliable partner in the EU's security architecture (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2024a). 2024 has been particularly notable for Albania's cooperation under the CSDP framework. In July 2024, the EU implemented its first assistance measure for Albania under the European Peace Facility, allocating €13 million to enhance the operational capacities of the Albanian Armed Forces (Council of the European Union, 2024b). This initiative aims to strengthen Albania's capabilities in mobility, maneuverability, and protection, thereby improving its contributions to CSDP operations and international coalitions. On November 19, 2024, Albania and the EU formalized a Security and Defence Partnership, as mentioned earlier. This agreement provides a framework for enhanced dialogue and cooperation on security issues, including crisis management, support for Ukraine, countering hybrid threats, cybersecurity, capacity building, counterterrorism, and integrated border management (European External Action Service [EEAS], 2024b). These initiatives collectively highlight Albania's strategic alignment with EU security and defense policies, reinforcing its role in regional stability and advancing its integration into European security structures.

Looking ahead, Albania is part of the EU Battlegroup and has expressed its willingness to support the European Union Naval Force (EUNAVFOR) Operation ASPIDES, aimed at ensuring maritime security in the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Gulf (COM, 2024: 94). In response to emerging hybrid threats, Albania unveiled its updated National Security Strategy in 2024, placing a strong emphasis on enhancing its defense capabilities to better address these complex security challenges (COM, 2024: 94).

Strategic Compass, which advocates for a strengthened role in security and defense. See National Cyber Security Authority (2024).

¹⁶ The participating countries of the region to the Balkan Medical Task Force are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia. See <https://balkanmedicaltaskforce.org/>

¹⁷ Schuman Security and Defence Forum is a partnership that brings together senior policy-makers from more than 30 partner countries, EU institutions, international and regional organisations, as well as leading think-tanks and academia. See European External Action Service (2023).

HYBRID THREATS AND FIMI

Another ever-growing aspect of EU CFSP alignment is related to the fight against hybrid threats and Foreign Information Manipulation Interference (FIMI). The large-scale cyberattacks suffered in Albania targeting critical and essential information infrastructure, such as those attributed to state-sponsored actors from Iran in 2022,¹⁸ underscore the imperative of prioritizing cybersecurity. This is particularly crucial as Albania advances the digitization of public and private services to enhance accessibility and efficiency for its citizens.¹⁹ While significant progress has been made in developing critical information infrastructure and implementing projects that improve service quality and reduce opportunities for corruption, these systems remain vulnerable to cyber threats. Both state and non-state actors, equipped with the necessary capabilities, continue to exploit these vulnerabilities, posing significant risks to Albania's digital ecosystem and national security.

In July 2022, Albania experienced a major cyberattack targeting its e-Albania system, disrupting government services and compromising sensitive data (Oghanna, 2023). This incident highlighted the country's vulnerability to cyber threats, despite its rapid digitalization (Zeneli, 2022). The incident also underscored the importance of enhancing cybersecurity education in Albanian higher education institutions (Çeko, 2023) and strengthening law enforcement capabilities for cybercrime investigation (Dushi & Bërdufi, 2017).

In response to escalating cyber threats, including significant attacks attributed to Iranian state-sponsored actors, Albania has taken decisive steps to enhance its cybersecurity measures and preparedness, through threat assessments, effective intelligence exchanges and multilateral cooperation. This proactive stance encompasses alignment with EU declarations and the adoption of restrictive measures to counter cyberattacks (Council of the European Union, 2024b). In 2024, Albania introduced a new National Security Strategy, with a strong emphasis on addressing hybrid threats, including disinformation and FIMI (National Cyber Security Authority, 2024). Building on this framework, a special parliamentary committee on disinformation and FIMI was established in June 2024 (Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare, 2024). This committee seeks to implement a whole-of-society approach by coordinating and overseeing institutional actions aimed at combating disinformation and mitigating foreign interference in Albania's democratic processes.

Albania has also expanded its cooperation with EU agencies, structures, and networks on cybersecurity and cyber diplomacy, and just recently it co-hosted the Global Cyber Policy Dialogue in Tirana in November 2024 (National Authority for Electronic Certification and Cyber Security, 2024). Additionally, it has engaged in multilateral efforts through international organizations to address cyber threats (EU Cyber Direct, 2024; Council of Europe, 2024). Strengthened cooperation is also pursued bilaterally with relevant states: During the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Tirana in early 2024, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Albanian

¹⁸ In July 2022, Albania faced a major cyberattack on its government infrastructure, which was linked to Iranian state actors. The attack was widely viewed as a response to Albania's support for the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), an Iranian opposition group in exile hosted by Albania. As a result, in September 2022, Albania severed diplomatic ties with Iran, expelling its embassy staff and citing the cyberattack as a key factor behind this decision. See Gritten (2022).

¹⁹ Albania has made significant progress in digitizing public services to enhance accessibility and efficiency for its citizens. By May 2022, approximately 95% of public services were available online through the e-Albania portal, streamlining processes and reducing bureaucracy. See European Commission (n.d.).

Minister of Foreign Affairs, Igli Hasani, and Secretary Blinken; this MoU aims to counter FIMI by foreign state actors and further reinforces Albania's commitment to safeguarding democratic institutions.

Albania's efforts in cybersecurity extend to the regional level. Notably, it will participate in the Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre, a regional initiative based in Montenegro (Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Centre, 2024). This initiative, spearheaded by France and Slovenia, fosters European support for enhancing cybersecurity capacity across the Western Balkans, further solidifying Albania's role as a proactive actor in regional and international cybersecurity cooperation. Demonstrating its continued commitment in this field, Albania officially became the 36th member of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) in Helsinki on June 13, 2024 (European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats [Hybrid CoE], 2024). While these initiatives represent considerable progress, sustained efforts are necessary to reduce vulnerabilities to foreign interference, and effectively address issues related to information manipulation and disinformation, in a European context increasingly prone to FIMI (Financial Times, 2024; Luhász, 2024; Benková, 2018;).

CONCLUSION

Alignment with CFSP is a geopolitical driver of Albania's EU integration process. It is one of the main reasons for the European Commission's readiness to support the Albanian government's goal of opening Cluster 6, "External Relations," by the end of 2024 by virtue of a third IGC, held on 17 December 2024. Considering that Albania was granted EU candidate status only in 2014, it is remarkable that, ten years later, Albania is being considered by EU officials as a potential frontrunner (Jones, 2024b). Structural reforms undertaken to strengthen rule of law lie at the core of Albania's strides, as noted in the successive progress reports by the European Commission; but CFSP alignment has contributed, in no small degree, to Albania's advanced position -especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, in which the value of values has dramatically risen. As a result of this advanced position, Albania's goal of EU membership by 2030 no longer seems distant or unrealistic -particularly as the European Commission has accepted in the 2024 Enlargement Package that it stands ready to support the 2027 horizon for finalizing the accession negotiations with Albania (Jones, 2024a).

By aligning with the EU's CFSP and making significant advances in Cluster 6, Albania continues to reinforce its place in the Union through gradual integration mechanisms, steadily moving closer to full EU integration. This progress not only strengthens Albania's position but also sends a powerful message to the entire Western Balkans region, highlighting the country's commitment to EU accession and shaping the broader discussions on enlargement -and the importance of CFSP alignment therein. It has been reiterated that the war gave the EU a geopolitical incentive to reboot enlargement; however, enlargement is not only about geopolitics (Karjalainen, 2023: 2). While there has been a trend in the EU to use enlargement in wartime as a stabilization and security-building mechanism (Anghel & Džankić, 2023), during the 1990s the impact of the Yugoslav wars did not determine EU membership. These conflicts serve as a stark reminder of the region's geopolitical relevance and fragility, as well as the EU's consideration as state-builder in denial (Keil & Arkan, 2014).

Albania's commitment to CFSP alignment confirms the existence of varying degrees of flexibility and autonomy in CFSP implementation (Hillion, 2017), notably in contrast with relatively deficient CFSP implementation by other states from the region (e.g. Serbia,

an EU candidate country since 2012). Albania's commitment also showcases the key importance of political culture and popular support for CFSP implementation (Koutrakos, 2017; Lampinen & Uusikylä, 1998). And it could well be argued that the deep-rooted Euro Atlantic sentiment which lies in Albania's CFSP alignment -and support to NATO- is one of the main sources of strategic added value that Tirana is bringing to the EU (Gritten, 2022).

Implementation of restrictive measures continues to be challenging. Enforcing EU standards in an area in which Albania is not part of the table of discussions where sanctions are formulated -and may not be aware of significant analysis involving financial sanctions or their foreseeable impact-, renders difficult for the above-mentioned institutions that are part of the Committee on International Restrictive Measures to put in practice the right enforcement and reporting mechanisms. Eventual shortcomings in enforcement and implementation of the restrictive measures were reflected in the European Commission's country report 2024, where it was held that "Albania has legal and institutional arrangements in place to deal with the implementation of the EU restrictive measures it has aligned with. However, the technical implementation and enforcement of the complex EU restrictive measures remain a challenge and Albania should further strengthen its capacity in this regard" (COM, 2024: 94).

These challenges can be effectively addressed through capacity-building initiatives - e.g. projects of delegated cooperation within the EU Delegation in Tirana, supported by experts from Member States-²⁰ and by offering Albania -and other candidate countries that fulfil the relevant sanctions requirements- the opportunity to participate as an observer in the relevant Council working groups, where decisions on the adoption, amendment, lifting, or renewal of sanctions are made after thorough examination. This would provide the participating countries with a comprehensive understanding of the rationale behind these measures and the most effective ways to implement them, as well as an added incentive to do so.

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²⁰ Such projects of delegated cooperation have borne important achievements to date, especially in the field of the fight against organized crime and corruption (e.g. EU4Focal, led by Spanish experts, which enabled, among other achievements, a cooperation between Albania and Ibero-American Association of Public Ministries, AIAMP: <https://albanianailynews.com/news/general-prosecutor-s-office-signs-memorandum-of-understanding-with-aiamp-1-1>).

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