
US, EU WARN ALBANIA AGAINST JUDICIAL REFORM DELAY

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The US and EU ambassadors to Tirana delivered an ultimatum to the leaders of Albanias political parties on Wednesday, demanding quick approval of the constitutional changes needed to enable an overhaul of the countrys corruption-riddled justice system.

Speaking to the parliamentary committee for justice reform, US ambassador Donald Lu said that Albania risked losing support from its Western allies if politicians did not act quickly.

If this reform fails, you, the members of this committee, will dishonour the people who elected you. And you will dishonor your relationship with the United States and the European Union, Lu said.

Lu said that the German chancellor, the EUs foreign policy chief and enlargement commissioner, and the US secretary of state and president had all appealed for the reform to be enacted.

Over this past year, I have seen Mrs. [Angela] Merkel, Mrs. [Federica] Mogherini, Mr. [Johannes] Hahn, Mr.[John] Kerry and Mr. [Barack] Obama ask Albania to pass this reform. I have never seen such support from your closest allies on any other subject. We all recognise how important this is to Albanias future, he said.

Albanias Western allies hope that the judicial reform will raise the rate of serious crime prosecution and reduce political influence on the judiciary.

The head of EU delegation in Tirana, Romana Vlahutin, said that Albanias progress towards EU membership would be seriously delayed if the reform is not approved.

By approving this reform before summer recess and by starting its implementation next autumn, Albania will have the chance to receive a positive recommendation from the EU Commission for the opening of negotiations for membership, Vlahutin said.

If this momentum is lost, this country will lose not only one, but several years, she added.

Reform of Albanias justice system has been under discussion since 2014 but the process has been dragged out by political leaders who believe that they could lose control over key positions in the judiciary.

Currently, the Constitutional Court, the High Court and a part of the High Court of Justice, the judicial systems main supervisory body, as well as the General Prosecutor, are politically

appointments.

The justice system is widely perceived as corrupt and unprofessional.

The High Court, for example, whose members currently are appointed by the president with the approval of parliament, has the exclusive right to judge cases against MPs. So far, it has found every accused politician not guilty

Parliamentary control over the General Prosecutor also means a lack of investigations into high-level corruption, it is alleged.

The reform requires as a first step changes in about a third of the countrys constitution, followed by a long process that requires about 40 new laws to be written and approved. The reform is expected to take several years to be implemented.

The main concern among foreign diplomats in Albania is that if the constitutional changes are not approved before the summer recess, parliament will not be able to do it afterwards because 2017 is an election year, meaning that it could be postponed for several more years.

But Lu warned political leaders that if they fail to take action, the public will judge them harshly at the polls.

I pity the blind political party or deaf political leader who blocks this reform, he said.

First, you will fail if you seek to block this reform. Second, you will face the anger of the Albanian public next year in the parliamentary elections if you think you can protect corrupt judges and prosecutors by blocking this reform, he added.

The governing Socialist Party and the Socialist Movement for Integration said after Lus statement that they are ready to approve the reform, and blamed the opposition Democratic Party for the delay.

The Democratic Party claimed that the government was lying but did not say if it would vote for the reform or not.

Gjergj Erebara BIRN Tirana

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