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## EU GIVES ALBANIA ULTIMATUM OVER JUDICIAL REFORM

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20.07.2016

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19.07.2016

EurActiv

Albania must pass anti-corruption reforms of its judiciary on Thursday (21 July) or sacrifice its hopes of starting negotiations to join the EU, MEPs warned today (19 July).

The Thursday deadline is the last possible one, Johannes Hahn, the Commissioner responsible for EUs neighbourhood policy and enlargement, told MEPs.

He spoke in a hastily organised session of the Parliament foreign affairs committee, which also discussed the aftermath of the foiled Turkish coup.

We want to make sure that the legislation has teeth, Hahn said. He added that the EU institutions also needed time to monitor how the reform worked.

It is widely assumed that if Albania passes the test, the December EU summit could decide to launch accession talks.

Albania obtained the status of EU candidate country in June 2014. The next step of its path toward EU accession is starting accession negotiations.

The country has disappointed its EU partners with its protracted in-fighting between government and opposition. That has resulted in an inability to pass legislation and encouraged to corruption and organised crime.

The Albanian mafia is, according to various reports, becoming a major threat to the EU. Statements in favour of a Greater Albania are also hardly conducive to the countrys rapprochement with the EU.

### **Attempt to create a protectorate?**

EU and US diplomats have been seeking to convince MPs from the opposition Democratic Party to back the proposed legislation, which is aimed at reducing corrosive political influence on the judiciary.

An important element of the proposed legislation is that candidates for judges and prosecutors would be vetted by an international committee of EU and US officials.

A majority of 94 out of 140 MPs votes is necessary to pass the reform, meaning that the vote of the Democratic Party is absolutely needed.

The compromise proposal was delivered by US Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who visited Tirana this week as diplomatic pressure on Albania escalated.

The Democratic Party has objected to the idea, arguing that it compromises Albanias sovereignty.

Hahn said that arguement had come as a surprise. He repeated that Thursday was the last possible deadline for passing the legislation, adding that if there were no decision, there was the possibility of holding a referendum. Reportedly, 90% of the population is in favour of a comprehensive judicial reform.

Slovenian MEPs were particularly vocal in the debate.

MEP Ivo Vaigl (Slovenia, ALDE), said that Albanians should realise how difficult EU enlargement has become, and that they should do their utmost to catch the last train on Thursday.

Aloiz Peterle (Slovenia, EPP), argued that the EU had a political problem with Albania, because the push for adopting the legislation was interpreted as an attempt to create a protectorate.

Tanja Fajon (S&D, Slovenia), said as long as the main Albanian negotiators were not assured of their immunity, when it comes to life, family and power base, in that order, it would be extremely difficult to achieve judicial reform.

Elmar Brok, the chair of the foreign affairs committee, said there would be telephone conversations in the next hours with Albanian politicians, to convey the message of the European parliament.

Hahn said the judicial reform in Albania had the potential to be an example for other countries in the region.

Serbia and Montenegro have already started accession talks, but Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are lagging behind Albania in their EU accession process.

By Georgi Gotev | EurActiv.com

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