

MEDIA MONITORING

Dominant Narratives about EU Integration in Albanian Digital Media

An analysis of the themes, frames, tones, and narratives in media coverage of the accession process

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1. Context

EU accession and integration have been a long-term commitment and strategic objective for Albania, often considered “the country’s key priority.”¹ Since applying for EU membership in 2009 and becoming an official candidate in 2014, the accession framework has served as a key driver of EU-related reforms involving fundamental rights, the rule of law, economic integration and development, and democratic governance more broadly.² Across successive governments, the national goal of EU integration has remained central to political priorities with consistent emphasis on EU-alignment on all fronts, including common foreign and security policy and the EU acquis.³ The positive momentum behind these efforts was further propelled by the start of accession negotiations in 2022 and the opening of all six negotiation clusters between October 2024 and November 2025.⁴

More recently, in May of 2026, Albania became the second candidate country to receive a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (IBAR) for the fundamentals cluster, allowing it to enter the concluding phase of the accession process.⁵ As a result, Albania appears to be “one of the most rapidly advancing EU candidate countries,” with the ambitious goal of concluding membership negotiations as early as 2027 and formally entering the Union by 2030.⁶

Beyond its institutional and procedural dimensions, Albania’s integration process is deeply embedded in domestic politics, with high levels of support for EU membership as a shared national objective. Public opinion is consistently positive: A 2025 survey by the European Commission found that support for EU accession in Albania was the highest in the region at 91%.⁷ Albania also ranked first among the countries that held a positive image of the EU, at 82%.⁸ In this sense, the overarching goal of EU integration and membership is a rare point of broad societal consensus in the otherwise-polarized Albanian political and media landscape.

Despite this alignment across the political spectrum, there are significant divergences and points of contention between government-aligned and opposition groups in their assessments of Albania’s EU membership process and how integration is expected to be achieved. Such variations are primarily expressed in political discourse and communicated in the public sphere via domestic media reporting. These polarized interpretations fundamentally shape public

understanding and opinion of European integration and influence the domestic informational and political environment, including policy decisions associated with the integration process itself. It is thus important to situate EU integration within the broader political and communicative context by analyzing and understanding these divergent assessments.

Against this backdrop, the media serve as an intermediary through which competing interpretations of EU integration are communicated to the public. Citizens primarily encounter and engage with the European integration process, an otherwise highly technical and multifaceted procedure, through media reporting and political communications. As a result, the way developments and opposing assessments of the accession process are selected, contextualized, and presented influences public discourse. Systematic media monitoring is therefore a means of identifying and examining the dominant narratives, frames, themes, and the recurring tones through which the process is portrayed across a diverse sample of Albanian digital media outlets.

Thus, while political and public support for EU integration as an overarching goal is well understood, this report focuses on the divergent interpretations of the integration and accession process. Its aim is to better understand the informational and political environment surrounding one of Albania's considerable national priorities.

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 2. Directorate-General, "Communication on EU Enlargement," 3.
 3. Ibid, 92.
 4. Wouter Zweers, "Albania's EU Accession Sprint: Balancing Momentum, Reform, and EU Scrutiny," Clingendael Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 3, 2025, 1, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/albanias-eu-accession-sprint-balancing-momentum-reform-and-eu-scrutiny>.
 5. Dimosthenis Mammonas, "Enlargement: Albania Meets Interim Benchmarks for Fundamentals Cluster," Council of the European Union, May 26, 2026, 1, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/05/26/enlargement-albania-meets-interim-benchmarks-for-fundamentals-cluster/>.
 6. Zweers, "Albania's EU Accession," 2.
 7. Directorate-General for Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood, "Majority of EU Citizens Support Further EU Enlargement, New Eurobarometer Survey Shows, While Perception Surveys in Candidate Countries Point to Overall Support for EU Accession," Enlargement and Eastern Neighbourhood (European Commission, September 2, 2025), https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/special-eurobarometer-and-perception-surveys-2025-09-02_en.
 8. Directorate-General, "Majority of EU Citizens."

2. Methodology

This report will focus on monitoring the dominant discourses of EU integration in Albanian digital media to answer the following questions:

- How is EU integration framed in Albanian media?
- What are the dominant themes, tones, and narratives that characterize this coverage?

As part of this study, 10 Albanian media outlets with online websites were selected, including mainstream television broadcasters (Top Channel, TV Klan, Syri); print newspapers (Gazeta Panorama, Gazeta Tema); high-traffic digital news websites (Lapsi, Shqiptarja.com, BalkanWeb); as well as independent fact-checking and civic accountability platforms (Faktoje, Citizens Channel). The selection of these outlets follows a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture a broad cross-section of the contemporary Albanian media ecosystem.

This approach is defined by two characteristics: First, it ensures source diversity by balancing high-reaching national television and print networks with digital-native platforms; Second, it reflects the political pluralism of the media ecosystem, accounting for pro-government, opposition-leaning, centrist, and independent / alternative media voices.

Selection of articles for monitoring

The Google Advanced Search tool was used to select 40 articles for monitoring. The search results were limited to digital media published by the defined sample of 10 Albanian media outlets between May 15, 2026, and June 15, 2026. Furthermore, keywords were used to identify articles that specifically covered EU integration, including:

- BE / EU
- Integrim / integration
- Negociata / negotiations
- Kapituj / chapters
- Komisioni European / European Commission
- Bruksel / Brussels
- IBAR

The selected keywords include integration as a broader concept, core institutional identifiers, and relevant technical and procedural markers. Both English and Albanian versions of each keyword were incorporated to ensure that English publications on Albanian media platforms were included, such as those by the Citizens Channel.

To avoid excessive restrictions for the search results, keywords were combined using the 'OR' operator. This strategy ensured that retrieved articles were not required to contain every keyword, but rather a minimum of one of the specified keywords to be included in the title or body of the article. Below is an example of the search prompt that was entered through the Advanced Search function for the desired results:

SEARCH EXAMPLE

Site: top-channel.tv ("BE" OR "EU" OR "negociata" OR "negotiations" OR "kapituj" OR "chapters" OR "IBAR" OR "Komisioni European" OR "European Commission" OR "Bruksel" OR "Brussels")
Custom Range: May 15, 2026 – June 15, 2026.

The initial search using this format yielded more than 80 articles related to EU integration. However, more than half of these articles reproduced nearly identical content or reported on the same events and developments with negligible differences in framing, tone and/or narrative. This reflects a well-documented characteristic of the Albanian online media environment where news is frequently republished across outlets with minimal editorial changes, otherwise known as *copy-paste journalism*.⁹

A screening process was conducted by a researcher to avoid overrepresenting individual news events and inflating the frequency of specific themes, frames, tones, or narratives. Articles containing overlapping content or covering the same event were compared, and a single article was retained for further analysis and coding. Preference was given to the article with the most comprehensive coverage involving greater contextual information, original reporting, or more detailed discussion about EU integration. Where possible, articles were selected from different media outlets to ensure diversity and avoid disproportionate representation of any single source.

Monitoring period

The monitoring period covering articles published between May 15 and June 15, 2026, was selected due to the concentration of developments in Albania's EU accession process. Several key milestones took place, including the positive IBAR for the first cluster, the Intergovernmental Conference, the EU-Western Balkans Summit, visits by EU leaders including the European Council President, and renewed discussion about Albania's accession timeline. Additionally, the anti-government civil society movement beginning toward the end of May garnered EU attention and sparked debates about the accession process, leading to increased visibility and attention in the media as well. As a result, this period provided a substantial sample for monitoring the dominant narratives, framing, tones, and themes surrounding EU integration.

The decision to focus the monitoring on a one-month period was also informed by the practical scope and methodological requirements of the research. Given the volume of digital media content and the need for systematic analysis of individual articles according to narratives, frames, themes, and tone, a defined timeframe allowed for a more focused and consistent examination of media coverage. The selected period therefore balances analytical depth with feasibility, while capturing a particularly dynamic phase in Albania's accession process and providing a rich sample for examining contemporary discourse surrounding EU integration.

Coding

The final sample of 40 articles was coded by a single researcher using Excel to identify main themes, framing, tone, and dominant narratives in relation to EU integration. Using pre-defined categories, each article could be assigned up to two codes per category to allow for nuance while preventing over-fragmentation of results. In cases where multiple interpretations were possible, coding prioritized the dominant features of the article.

MAIN THEMES

The dominant focus and/or topic of the article as pertaining to EU integration, including:

- Readiness and timeline
- Accession negotiations
- Anti-corruption
- Economy and Single Market
- Rule of law and judiciary reform
- The closing and / or opening of negotiation chapters
- Environment and Green Agenda
- Elections and democratic standards
- Agriculture and rural development

FRAMING

How EU integration is framed and characterized in Albanian digital media, as being:

- A political process
- A technical reform process
- A geopolitical issue
- An economic opportunity
- A symbolic and / or national identity project

TONE

The tone with which EU integration is reported on and presented, including:

- Positive and / or optimistic
- Skeptical
- Polarized
- Neutral and/or analytical
- Negative and/or alarmist

NARRATIVES

The dominant narratives and discourses surrounding EU integration, being:

- EU integration as a positive / success story
- EU integration as external pressure
- EU hypocrisy and/or fatigue
- EU integration as a political tool
- Albania is not ready for Europe
- Europe is not ready for Albania
- Reforms as the path to integration

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9. Ilda Londo, "Changing Media Landscape, Same Persistent Problems. The Future of the Media in Albania – Facts and Trends," Our Media, January 2025, 13, <https://institutemedia.org/research-changing-media-landscape-same-persisting-problems/>.

3. Key Findings

The following section outlines the key findings of the research with regard to the main themes and topics, framing, and tones across articles related to EU integration.

Main Themes

In the context of EU integration, thematic analysis identifies the primary focuses that dominate media coverage. Specifically, this reveals the main issues and aspects of the integration process that receive the greatest attention in the media, and vice versa. Understanding the thematic priorities of media reporting provides insight into which dimensions of EU integration are at the forefront of public and political discourse.

Of the 40 monitored articles, 20 were identified as focusing on readiness and timeline in relation to EU integration. Articles coded under this theme concentrated on Albania's perceived and / or projected level of preparedness for EU membership as well as the pace and timing of the accession process. Most often, this coverage referenced delays or accelerations associated with the 2027 and 2030 targets for the closing of accession negotiations and formal entry into the Union, respectively.

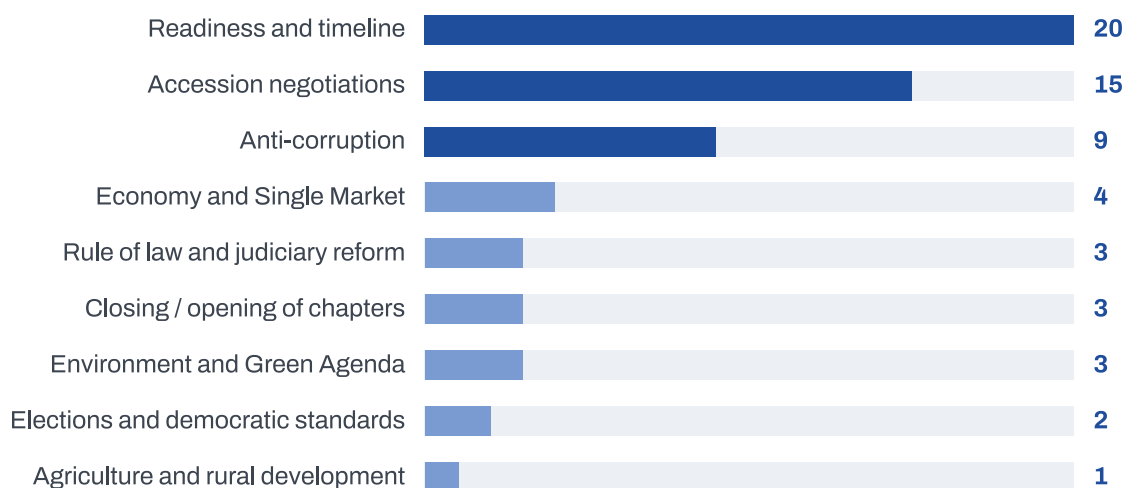


Figure 1. Main themes and topics surrounding EU integration.

Secondary to this main theme was coverage focusing on accession negotiations and anti-corruption, with a frequency of 15 and 9, respectively. In the first case, coverage examined technical and / or procedural developments, often pertaining to the IBAR results, the first foundations cluster, and related institutional reforms. Articles

covering anti-corruption were primarily concerned with issues of judicial reform, the Belinda Balluku case, the role of SPAK, and the persisting battle against high-level corruption as a precondition for EU integration.

These findings indicate that communications about EU integration are dominated by discussions of immediate preparedness and progress pertaining to the accession process, as propelled by positive results, such as the IBAR, and / or undermined by sustained difficulties with corruption. Less attention is devoted to the substantive policy requirements and sectoral reforms associated with membership, such as the economy and single market, agriculture, environmental policy, etc.

Dominant Frames

Where main themes reveal the topics that are covered in the media, framing analysis identifies how these themes are presented and interpreted in the political and informational environment. Necessarily, the frames through which developments in the EU integration process are presented influence how audiences interpret these events and Albania's membership pathway as a whole. Understanding the dominant framing of media reporting on integration thus provides a nuanced understanding of the current political and public discourse.

Of the 40 monitored articles, 24 were framed as political. Articles coded under this frame type presented EU integration as a primarily political process. Specifically, these articles highlight the actions, decision-making, and claims of political leaders, government officials, parties, and existing state institutions as they pertain to the accession process. Against the backdrop of integration, these articles involve political communications which evaluate government performance, critique government and / or opposition leaders, and allocate responsibility for any progress or setbacks with Albania's accession process. As such, EU integration is most frequently framed as an issue of governance, accountability, and competition between parties.

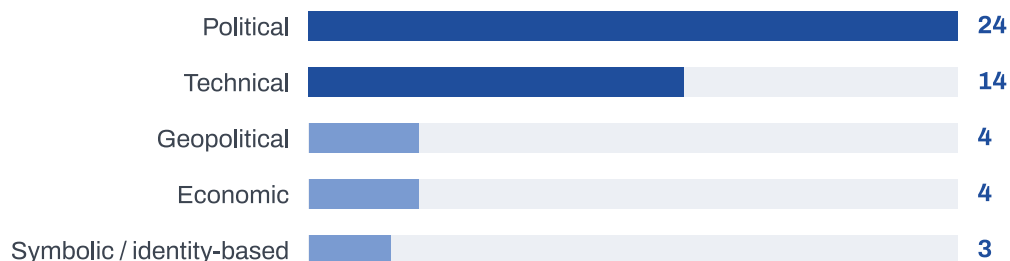


Figure 2. Dominant framing of EU integration discussions.

The second-most frequent frame was technical, representing 14 articles. Articles coded under this frame type presented EU integration as a procedural and institutional process. Specifically, this frame is characterized by administrative developments throughout the integration process, including the opening and closing of negotiation chapters, accession criteria, formal assessments, reform requirements, and implementation frameworks. It is worth noting that most articles under this frame type were also coded under the political frame, and vice versa. Thus, discussions about technical aspects of the accession process often took place in a politicized context and / or were interpreted from a domestic political lens.

Comparatively, geopolitical, economic, and symbolic / identity-based frame types were rare, occurring in only 3-4 articles per. This suggests that portrayals of EU integration are predominantly political and technical, and less likely to involve discussions about the long-term, societal implications of EU membership involving economic, geopolitical, or social elements.

Tones

While the main themes and frames reveal what is being discussed and how, the tone through which EU integration is discussed is equally important. In media reporting, this aspect reflects the overall attitudes, perceptions, and emotional orientations of the public sphere towards the EU integration process. Evaluating these orientations offers valuable insight into the communicative and emotive environment in which public discourse about EU integration takes place, as being positive, negative, skeptical, polarized, or neutral. It also reveals the nuances of public attitudes towards the progress and developments associated with the accession process itself beyond public support for EU membership alone, which is already well-documented.

Of the 40 monitored articles, there was no single dominant tone type. Out of the five tone types, the positive / optimistic and skeptical tones were the most frequent, with 10 articles each. The negative / alarmist and neutral tones were in proximity, with 9 articles each, while the polarized tone type was the least frequently found in only five articles.



Figure 3. The primary tones with which EU integration is reported on.

Articles coded as containing a positive / optimistic tone discussed EU integration as a successful process with positive momentum towards eventual membership. Emphasis was placed on the achievement of benchmarks, institutional progress, and reform advancements, portraying Albania's path as being obtainable, a point of optimism, a source of national pride, and an example for other candidate countries. Contrarily, articles coded as containing a skeptical tone scrutinized the EU integration process, frequently challenging the expected timeline, perceived progress, and credibility of statements made about accession procedures. This tone was further characterized by questions about reforms and concerns about Albania's capacity to meet institutional standards for membership.

Articles coded as containing a negative / alarmist tone were more likely to emphasize perceived failures and setbacks associated with the EU integration process, including anti-corruption reforms, shortcomings with democratic reforms, and strained relations with EU representatives. Articles coded as containing a neutral tone did not display any clear emotive orientation and discussed developments in Albania's accession process from a more technical and factual stance. Lastly, articles containing a polarized tone discussed EU integration through conflicting and / or competing political interpretations, often highlighting conflicts and points of disagreement between government and opposition groups.

This balanced distribution is indicative of the diverse array of tones and emotive orientations through which integration is discussed. It reveals the nuances of public discourse wherein optimistic outlooks are concurrent with criticism as well as skepticism about Albania's future as it pertains to the EU integration process.

4. Dominant Narratives

The following section identifies the dominant narratives about the EU integration process that emerged across the monitored sample of outlets and articles. Beyond identifying the topics, frames, and tones through which integration is discussed, a narrative analysis offers an in-depth evaluation of the divergent assessments of the EU accession process in the political and informational environment. Specifically, it offers insight into how advancements, challenges, progress, and Albania's path towards membership as a whole is interpreted by the public sphere, beyond incremental developments and / or newsworthy events.

Of the 40 monitored articles, the two most dominant narratives that emerged were: (1) Reforms as the necessary path towards EU membership, and (2) Albania's lack of preparedness for accession. The least dominant narratives were those which discussed the EU's lack of preparedness for Albanian integration, as well as hypocrisy and/or fatigue on the part of the EU.

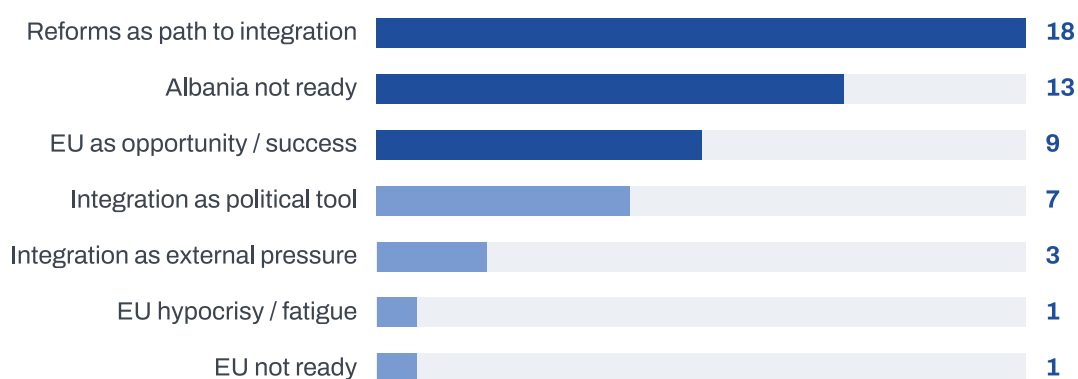


Figure 4. The dominant narratives characterizing EU integration discussions.

Narrative A: Reforms as the Path to Integration

The most dominant narrative identified across the sample of monitored articles was that of “reforms as the path to integration,” found across 18 articles. This narrative is complex as it presents integration from a critical lens rather than from a single, explicit posture, often combining technical, political, economic, and social elements. Fundamentally, articles coded under this narrative consider the EU integration

process as contingent on Albania's capacity to meet institutional standards and implement the reforms necessary for the closing of negotiation chapters and, ultimately, for membership.

Integration and membership, in turn, are thus not considered automatic guarantees but as continuously conditional processes which are dependent on perpetual advancement in critical areas requiring improvement, namely the rule of law, anti-corruption, democratic governance, and judiciary reform and independence. In essence, the narrative is that installing reforms is the only path towards integration, without alternative routes, and that existing progress, while a positive sign, does not negate the responsibilities that political leaders have to meet remaining criteria.

Most often, articles containing this narrative appeared to make strong connections between technical developments in the accession procedure, involving the IBAR, the opening and closing of negotiation chapters, and EU evaluations, and the domestic political environment and the reform trajectory within it. Against this backdrop, articles were both positive and negative in their evaluations. Some portrayed existing reforms and institutional developments as signals of positive advancement, while others highlighted persisting challenges and / or applied pressure by calling for the intensification of reform implementation efforts. This was particularly prominent in discussions about the IBAR. While the IBAR result was generally perceived to be a sign of progress, many articles cautioned against the overstatement of the results as being positive, citing EU concerns about continued domestic struggles against corruption, for example, and the need to meet evolving EU standards.

Despite some variations, the articles under this narrative type are indicative of a 'job-not-done' perception of the EU integration process whereby, despite ambitious timelines for membership, reforms and institutional standards are still to be met and cannot be bypassed. Thus, this narrative reveals that EU integration is most often discussed and reported on from a conditionality framework. Additionally, it is revealing of the central role of reforms as a measure of preparedness for EU membership by both domestic and EU political actors.

Narrative B: Albania Not Ready

The second-most dominant narrative identified across the sample of monitored articles was that of "Albania not ready," found across 13 articles. Articles coded under this narrative were primarily concerned with Albania's institutional deficiencies and

insufficient reform trajectory, portraying the country as not fit and / or not ready for membership in the Union. Combining technical and political elements, this narrative is an evaluation of Albania's current and expected level of preparedness, not only to meet EU standards but also to maintain said standards once membership has been achieved. For example, some articles discussed the inability of many Albanian businesses to survive the transformation required by the integration process and market formalization.

Against this backdrop, deficiencies were most frequently assessed to be in the fields of corruption, judiciary reform, and rule of law. EU assessments and statements from domestic and EU political actors were frequently used in these articles to support the notion that membership conditions remain unfulfilled despite positive progress.

While Narrative A is also concerned with potential shortcomings involving reforms, it approaches the subject of EU integration from a conditionality perspective, assessing reforms as the necessary mechanism for the accession procedure. Contrarily, Narrative B approaches the subject using a predetermined evaluation of Albania's current position and perceived readiness within that procedure. Taken together, the dominance of these two narratives across media reporting about EU integration implies that the process is not necessarily characterized by optimism, but rather critical evaluations of Albania's readiness for membership and the consequences associated with maintaining EU standards once membership is achieved.

5. Appendix

Frequency Table A. Main Themes and Topics

Main Theme / Topic	Frequency
Readiness and timeline	20
Accession negotiations	15
Anti-corruption	9
Economy and Single Market	4
Rule of law and judiciary reform	3
Closing / opening of chapters	3
Environment and Green Agenda	3
Elections and democratic standards	2
Agriculture and rural development	1

Frequency Table B. Dominant Frames

Frame	Frequency
Political	24
Technical	14
Geopolitical	4
Economic	4
Symbolic / Identity-Based	3

Frequency Table C. Tones

Tone	Frequency
Skeptical	10
Positive / Optimistic	10
Negative / Alarmist	9
Neutral	9
Polarized	5

Frequency Table D. Dominant Narratives

Narrative(s)	Frequency
Reforms as Path to Integration	18
Albania Not Ready	13
EU as Opportunity / Success	9
Integration as Political Tool	7
Integration as External Pressure	3
EU Hypocrisy / Fatigue	1
EU Not Ready	1

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