Albania and FYR Macedonia accession talks recommended

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On 17 April 2018, the European Commission recommended launching accession talks with Albania and FYR Macedonia, both of which have up until now been candidates for accession

If voted on by the European Council, they will join neighbouring Serbia and Montenegro in the next step of the accession process and begin official negotiations.

The step marks a clear recognition in the progress both countries have made in meeting criteria for accession into the EU.

Human rights, and the human rights of LGBTI people, have formed an ever stronger part of these criteria, so how do both countries look in terms of protections for LGBTI people as they move closer to negotiations for accession?

ALBANIA

With the score of 33% on our Rainbow Map, Albania is not only ahead of most of its neighbours (except Montenegro with 39%), but also a number of EU member states.

Overall, the legal framework in Albania includes **general guarantees** of respect for human rights, and the human rights of LGBTI people specifically. Furthermore, a **dedicated action plan** for the promotion and protection of the human rights of LGBTI people is in place in Albania and LGBTI activists enjoy strong connections to a number of policy makers and politicians.

However, implementation falls short of the image painted on paper. Public attitudes remain highly negative, hate speech and discriminatory language continue to be a problem in media coverage and on line, and steps should be taken to introduce legal gender recognition procedures and partnership protection for same-sex couples.

As and when the Council decides on initiating negotiations for accession, a focus on implementation needs to form part of these discussions to ensure real change for LGBTI is achieved before Albania enters the EU.

FYR MACEDONIA

Macedonia, on the other hand, scores only 16% on our Rainbow Map, and up until a year ago it would have been unimaginable that the country would be recommended for starting negotiations so soon.

The change in the political landscape has brought about many changes, including for LGBTI people who prior to the political change were the subjects of disinformation and demonisation campaigns. Parliamentary elections were held in Macedonia in December 2016. Following months of turmoil, violent protests and even attacks in the parliament itself, the political crisis was finally resolved in the spring of 2017 and a government formed by the Social Democrats in coalition with Albanian parties, marking a significant political change for the country which had

been ruled by the conservative VMRO DPMNE for over a decade.

In the last year, the Skopje Pride Weekend was opened by the Minister of Culture. No government representative had been present at Pride events in the past. Furthermore, the 5th anniversary of the Macedonian LGBTI Support Center on October 31st was attended by the Prime Minister, Mr. Zoran Zaev, who addressed those present and publicly pledged support for the human rights of LGBTI people.

A draft anti-discrimination law, specifically mentioning sexual orientation and gender identity, has been put together and is set to be voted on this year. Conversations have been started about legal gender recognition. An interparliamentary group of MPs from across the political spectrum have founded an intergroup on LGBTI rights to collaborate on identifying and taking advantage of opportunities for the promotion and protection of the human rights of LGBTI people. Furthermore, state funding is being allocated to an LGBTI shelter, and to Pride Weekend activities.

The political drive and momentum has truly been incredible. If Macedonia progresses to the next stage of accession talks, ensuring that the aforementioned legislative initiatives are passed and followed by thorough implementation efforts should be central to the conversations around human rights.

Both Albania and FYR Macedonia have come a long way in recent years in support for and action around promotion and protection of the human rights of LGBTI people.

We welcome the recognition of this progress by the European Commission in recommending that both countries enter the next stage of negotiation and hope that the next stage brings further progress and, crucially, implementation, thus resulting in real change for LGBTI people in both countries.