

ALBANIA TAKES FIRST LEGAL STEP TO EU MEMBERSHIP

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Albania's long journey toward EU membership received a boost over the weekend as the country signed a stabilisation and association agreement (SAA) with the EU after three years of preparations.

EU enlargement commissioner Olli Rehn and foreign minister Besnik Mustafaj in Tirana on Saturday (18 February) signed the agreement, which is the first legal step to fully-fledged EU membership.

The SAA is a contractual economic and political relationship with the EU, which obliges Albania to adopt EU standards on a range of single market issues, to lift trade barriers and to co-operate with its neighbours.

European Commission President **Jose Manuel Barroso**, who attended the signing ceremony, said *"this is a huge step for Albania on the road to EU membership,"* but he added that much would depend on the actual implementation of the deal.

"This is no time to relax your efforts. The real work begins now that the agreement has been initialled. Albania has to establish a track-record in implementing this agreement, in order to move closer to the EU," the commission chief stated.

Albania must make *"serious attempts"* to fight organised crime and corruption, liberalise its economy, strengthen property rights and secure free speech, Mr Barroso said.

Albanian Prime Minister **Sali Berisha** said *"We regard this moment as an obligation as well as an opportunity. We are committed to implementing the agreement to make the nation's dream of integrating into the EU a reality."*

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