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Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe (Monitoring Committee)

Report of the Public Seminar on “Comprehensive actions to fighting corruption: policies and instruments”, which was held on Monday, 2 December 2024 in Tirana (Albania)

Public Seminar, with the participation of:

- **H.E. Mr Ulsi Manja, Minister of Justice of Albania**
- **H.E. Ms Adea Pirdeni, Minister of State for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption**
- **Mr Olsian Çela, General Prosecutor of the Republic of Albania**
- **Mr Altin Dumani, Director of the Special Structure against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK)**
- **Ms Aida Hajnaj, Director of NBI (National Bureau of Investigation)**

Mr Ulsi Manja, Minister of Justice of Albania, explained the paramount importance of combating corruption, which has been a cornerstone of Albania's reform efforts. He presented a comprehensive overview of the achievements of the vetting committee for judges and prosecutors, emphasising its crucial role in reestablishing the rule of law in the country. This committee had emerged as one of the most trusted institutions in Albania, garnering widespread public support for its rigorous and impartial evaluations.

The credibility of the anti-corruption drive was further underscored by the fact that even high-ranking officials, including the former President of the Republic and a former Prime Minister, were subjected to investigation. This development sent a powerful message that no individual, regardless of their position or status, was above the law, reinforcing the principle of equality before the law.

Mr Manja emphasized the pivotal role of technology in enhancing transparency and combating corruption. The implementation of digital solutions had significantly contributed to streamlining processes and reducing opportunities for malfeasance. In line with this commitment to modernization, a new anti-corruption strategy was currently being drafted in collaboration with the Council of Europe, ensuring alignment with international best practices.

Addressing the challenges within the judiciary, Mr. Manja stressed the importance of filling vacancies in accordance with international standards. This approach aimed to ensure the appointment of qualified and impartial judges, thereby strengthening the integrity of the judicial system.

Furthermore, Mr Manja highlighted the critical need for robust whistleblower protection mechanisms. Such protections were essential for encouraging individuals to come forward with information about corrupt practices without fear of retaliation.

In conclusion, Mr Manja expressed confidence that these comprehensive policies and reforms had positioned Albania on a trajectory to fulfill its obligations and advance its aspirations for European Union membership. The multifaceted approach to combating corruption, enhancing judicial integrity, and promoting transparency demonstrates Albania's commitment to aligning itself with EU standards and values.

Ms Adea Pirdeni, Minister of State for Public Administration and Anti-Corruption, delivered a comprehensive update on progress in combating corruption and enhancing public administration efficiency. She began by elucidating the current status of Albania's engagement with the Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) monitoring procedure. Minister Pirdeni reported that Albania had successfully concluded three rounds of evaluation with GRECO. Regarding the fourth round, she announced that nine out of thirteen recommendations had been successfully implemented, demonstrating Albania's commitment to addressing corruption issues. Furthermore, she informed that the fifth round of evaluation was currently in progress, showcasing Albania's ongoing dedication to improvement and transparency.

Minister Pirdeni highlighted the creation of an online platform designed to disclose information about public officials' assets. This digital initiative aimed to increase accountability and public trust in government officials.

To further strengthen anti-corruption efforts, Minister Pirdeni revealed that an integrity coordinator had been appointed in each ministry. This strategic placement of dedicated personnel underscores Albania's proactive approach to fostering a culture of integrity within its governmental structures.

The Minister also announced the adoption of a new law on State police, signifying Albania's commitment to reforming and strengthening its law enforcement agencies.

One of the most notable achievements highlighted by Minister Pirdeni was the digitalization of public services. She stated that 95% of public services were now provided online through the e-Albania portal. This digital transformation not only enhanced efficiency but also significantly reduced opportunities for petty corruption by minimizing direct interactions between citizens and public officials.

Looking ahead, Minister Pirdeni outlined two key legislative priorities. First, she emphasized the need to align Albania's whistleblower protection laws with EU legislation, demonstrating Albania's commitment to international best practices. Second, she stressed the importance of adopting a law on lobbying, which would further enhance transparency in the political process.

In conclusion, Minister Pirdeni acknowledged that current practices in public administration were influencing business actors. This suggests that the reforms and digital transformations in the public sector were having a positive impact on the business environment, potentially reducing corruption and improving the ease of doing business in Albania.

These comprehensive measures and future plans reflect Albania's strong commitment to combating corruption, enhancing public administration efficiency, and aligning with EU standards in governance and transparency.

Mr Olsian Çela, General Prosecutor of the Republic of Albania, emphasised the necessity of a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to combat corruption effectively. He stressed that the fight against corruption required specialized investigative techniques and tools to uncover complex schemes and networks.

The General Prosecutor highlighted the critical importance of coordination and collaboration with various law enforcement agencies, particularly in addressing money laundering and economic crimes. This inter-agency cooperation was essential for tracking illicit financial flows and dismantling corrupt networks.

To bolster these efforts, Mr. Çela noted that forty-four prosecutors had been assigned to specialized crime units. These dedicated prosecutors focused on investigating and prosecuting corruption, financial crimes, and organized criminal activities.

Furthermore, the prosecutor's office had strengthened its international cooperation efforts, particularly with EUROJUST. This collaboration enhanced Albania's capacity to tackle cross-border corruption cases and facilitates the exchange of information and best practices with European counterparts.

Mr Çela also mentioned that the manual on money laundering and recovery of assets had been updated. This revision aimed to provide prosecutors with the latest guidance and tools to effectively investigate financial crimes and recover illicitly obtained assets.

These measures collectively demonstrated Albania's commitment to enhancing its anti-corruption framework and aligning with international standards in the fight against corruption and organised crime.

Mr Altin Dumani, Director of the Special Structure against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), outlined the organisation's responsibilities and achievements since its inception in December 2019. SPAK's mandate included investigating high-ranking officials, including members of the executive, parliament, and mayors.

The structure comprised 20 prosecutors and 60 investigators from the National Bureau of Investigation, along with support staff. Mr Dumani acknowledged the Council of Europe's support for justice reform and emphasised SPAK's commitment to transparency, international cooperation, and concrete results.

SPAK's focus extended beyond prosecuting senior officials to combating organized crime through collaboration with foreign law enforcement agencies. The organisation also prioritised asset confiscation, having seized approximately 150 million euros since its establishment.

International cooperation played a crucial role in SPAK's operations, with 42 joint investigative teams established and cooperation agreements signed with various international agencies and countries, including Montenegro and North Macedonia.

Mr Dumani attributed SPAK's success partly to its institutional independence. He noted that prosecutors do not have special status and return to their previous positions after nine years with SPAK.

Ms Aida Hajnaj, Director of NBI (National Bureau of Investigation), provided an overview of the agency's current status and challenges. As the newest law enforcement body in Albania, the NBI's mission was focused on tackling corruption and organized crime. Ms Hajnaj reported that the agency had 40 investigators employed out of a total planned capacity of 60. She also mentioned that the NBI had benefited from financial training provided by the European Commission, specifically focused on combating money laundering. Ms Hajnaj emphasized that expanding the NBI's operational capacity was an ongoing challenge. She concluded by stating that the persistence of corruption in Albania made seminars like this one vitally important for progress.

A discussion ensued, with the participation of Ms Yasko, Ms Pirdeni, Mr Fridez, Mr Manja, Sir Christopher Chope, Mr Dumani, Ms Nowicka, and Ms Gjylameti.