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Insights into Albania:

Internal Struggles and Geopolitical Challenges in the Western Balkans

Edited by Tanya Domi

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COVER: Flag of Albania (Photo by Kutay Tanir/Getty Images, photo illustration by New Lines Institute)

Albania



Foreword

Albania stands at a crossroads where tradition grapples with transformation, democracy contends with old political fault lines, and aspirations for greater integration into Euro-Atlantic political structures collide with persistent social and economic injustices. The regional landscape is rapidly shifting, and Albania finds itself confronting a set of interlocking challenges that resonate throughout the Western Balkans.

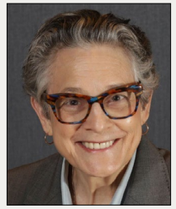
Efforts to strengthen the rule of law have yet to uproot entrenched corruption, while the aspiration of European Union membership must contend with stalled reforms and widespread political fragmentation. Most importantly, the promise of equality remains elusive: Women navigate enduring patriarchal frameworks, minority communities continue to experience discrimination in census counts and public life, and LGBTQ+ citizens fight daily battles for recognition and protection.

This anthology presents a comprehensive look at Albania's national concerns and aspirations in 2025 and beyond amid this backdrop. The essays included examine the country's electoral politics, the state of its judiciary, domestic and regional dimensions of security, and the nuanced social struggles that cut across lines of gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The authors collectively highlight the larger geopolitical influences at play – from EU accession negotiations to NATO's evolving strategic footprint in the Western Balkans – and how they intersect with day-to-day realities for Albanian citizens.

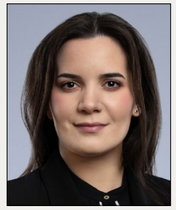
The anthology clarifies the prevailing uncertainties and points to pragmatic and forward-looking solutions for Albania and its neighbors. By drawing on analyses that address issues from youth emigration and the politics of identity to external pressures from regional and global powers, these essays serve as both a benchmark of present concerns and a blueprint for constructive policymaking.

In doing so, they underscore the fundamental premise that sustainable peace and prosperity in the Western Balkans rests upon deepening democratic values, ensuring inclusive governance, and securing genuine social justice for all.

Tanya Domi and Emina Muzaferija



Tanya Domi is an Adjunct Assistant Professor of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs and is an affiliate faculty member of the Harriman Institute, where she has taught in the Balkan Studies program since 2008. Prior to her faculty appointment at Columbia, Domi served in the U.S. Army for 15 years and later worked as a Congressional aide and military policy advisor to the late Congressman Frank McCloskey, a leading champion for U.S. intervention in the Bosnian War. She also worked internationally for more than a decade on issues related to democratic transitional development, including media development, human rights, and human trafficking. She has expanded her research to include genocide, conflict-related sexual violence, and prevention of atrocity crimes. Domi was seconded by the U.S. State Department to the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1996, where she served in various roles, including as Spokesperson and counsel to former Ambassador Robert Frowick and Ambassador Robert Barry.



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Muzaferija previously worked for the U.N. Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the Embassy of Bosnia-Herzegovina in The Hague, and Al Jazeera Balkans.

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Albanian expatriates rally in Thessaloniki, Greece, during Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's tour of Albanian communities.

Current State of Politics in Albania and the Upcoming 2025 General Elections

Ruben Avxhiu

As Albania's May 11 elections approach, the country has made significant strides toward justice reform, and the economy has benefited from an unprecedented tourism and construction boom. However, inequality has increased, corruption remains pervasive, and the trend of youth emigration continues unabated.

Never in the post-communist era has a political party governed Albania for three consecutive terms. Prime Minister Edi Rama, now in his 12th year in office, can tout several historic successes, including opening negotiations on the first chapters with the European Union on Oct. 15, 2024.[1] On the other hand, his government also faces corruption scandals, unresolved social and economic problems, and failures in democracy. Nonetheless, barring any significant development, his Socialist Party of Albania (SPA) remains the favorite in the upcoming elections.

Indications that a change in government may still not be on the horizon for Albania can be found by analyzing the country's political history, the main political players, and the key issues likely to influence voter behavior.

Albania's Political Landscape

Albania had a rocky transition from communism to democracy, with the lowest point in 1997 when the country was on the brink of a civil war. However, it made progress in the following decades, becoming a member of NATO in 2009 and a candidate for the European Union in 2014, finally beginning EU accession negotiations in July 2022.

Albania is a parliamentary republic where executive power is exercised by the prime minister and the government. The unicameral parliament, composed of 140 members, represents the legislative power, and the president holds mostly ceremonial duties.

President Bajram Begaj was elected in June 2022 after serving as chief of general staff of the Albanian Armed Forces and is a reticent outsider to the political scene. Rama has been prime minister since September 2013. In the current parliament, the Socialist Party of Albania (SPA) holds 75 of the 140 seats; the Alliance for Change coalition, led by the Democratic Party (DPA) holds 59; and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) and Social Democratic Party each hold three.

Socialist Party of Albania

The SPA is the heir of the Labor Party of Albania, which oversaw the harshest communist regime in Eastern Europe until 1991. The party transformed in the ensuing years to the point that it claims today to be the country's greatest champion of the Western orientation. Its communist past features regularly in political attacks by the opposition, but the issue is less relevant nowadays; Albanian voters have been more interested in solutions to their current problems than their politicians' backgrounds, and some key opposition leaders also have ties to the communist past.

After spending the first post-communist years in opposition, the SPA won the elections of 1997 amid the chaos that engulfed Albania after the failure of several sprawling pyramid schemes.[2] In mid-1990s, hundreds of thousands of Albanians were lured into putting their life savings into these schemes. The government was slow to warn the people against them and even tried to incorporate them into its narrative of economic success, and when they collapsed by the end of 1996 and the beginning of 1997, throwing the country into chaos, the government was blamed for it. Public outrage turned into open rebellion and anarchy, with thousands of people arming themselves after attacking and looting military storage sites.[3] State institutions collapsed, and an international military operation was put in place to distribute food and medicine.[4]

The SPA oversaw a successful return to stability and won again in 2001, but it suffered from internal conflict and was slow to respond to growing social and economic problems in the country. It was voted out in 2005, and a short power struggle saw Rama, then mayor of the capital, Tirana, become party leader. Rama went through a challenging learning curve, as SPA lost again in 2009 national elections and he had to walk back his promise to resign from the chairmanship.[5] However, he led his party back to power and strengthened his position in the following years.

In addition to its parliamentary majority, the SPA now also enjoys complete control of municipal power. Except for a few small towns, the mayors and municipal council majorities belong to the ruling party. The opposition alleges that with this much power, the SPA is behaving like a party-state. Public employees are bound by law to remain apolitical; however, the reality is complex. Either because they fear that a return of the DPA to power would lead to major personnel changes or because they fear potential retribution by their politically appointed superiors, state and public employees are inclined to help the electoral cause of the ruling party.

In April 2021, a few days before local elections, screenshots from a database with personal data of 910,000 voters were leaked by an unknown party. The database was apparently used by SPA to create a system of "patronage" based on which party members were assigned lists of people to canvass during the campaign. The opposition compared it to the old network of informants in the communist regime. The most serious allegation was that SPA had appropriated the state-owned database of e-Albania, the online interface for most public services in Albania.

SPA acknowledged the existence of the database but claimed it was collected through years of grassroots work by its local organizations. SPA is indeed the best-organized political party in the country, yet international observers of past elections have also noted its misuse of administrative resources, including pressure on public employees.[6] There has been little follow-up on those concerns, so the misuse of state resources is likely to return in the 2025 campaign.

To deny the SPA this possible advantage, the DPA is employing a strategy of civil disobedience to paralyze the economy until the government collapses and the SPA agrees on a nonpartisan, technocratic government until election day. However, its implementation has failed. Not enough followers have shown up to cause major disruption. Those who have suffered its limited blockades are mostly regular citizens. This strategy is not new. It worked before the elections of 2017, when Rama agreed to form a unity government with the opposition. The SPA won nevertheless.

Democratic Party of Albania

The DPA emerged as Albania's major anti-communist political force in December 1990 and achieved a significant electoral victory in 1992. Its founder and chairman, Sali Berisha, became the first democratically elected president

of the country. Despite successfully introducing major reforms and steering Albania toward a market economy and democracy, his first administration ended disastrously in the 1997 pyramid scheme collapse.

The DPA fared much better during its second stint in office (2005-2013), with Berisha serving this time as prime minister. Albania became a member of NATO and applied for EU membership. However, in 2013 the Socialist Party returned to power, benefiting from a dip in Democrats' popularity and the split between DPA and their junior government partner, SMI. Berisha resigned from the leadership, and the DPA has struggled to regain its footing ever since, with a streak of poor political decisions and electoral outcomes.

On May 19, 2021, almost a month after national elections in which the DPA was routed once again, the U.S. State Department publicly designated Berisha "due to his involvement in significant corruption," particularly during his time as prime minister.[7] The announcement shocked the Albanian public. Many hailed it as the clearest sign that a new anti-corruption era had begun, yet questions arose about what exactly led to such a move. The State Department's reluctance to provide more details created an information vacuum, which Berisha quickly filled with his narrative, alleging that the designation resulted from devious lobbying by Rama. He also blamed billionaire philanthropist George Soros, a popular trend in Eastern Europe.

The most significant consequence of the designation came in the summer of 2021 when U.S. Ambassador to Albania Yuri Kim pressured DPA Chairman Lulzim Basha to expel Berisha from the party's parliamentary group.[8] The U.S. had heavily invested in reforming Albania's justice system, and the membership of a designated politician would directly affect the DPA's relationship with the United States.

Basha found himself in an impossible position. Berisha had plucked him from relative obscurity and made him a minister in his first Cabinet in 2005. Basha later became minister of foreign affairs and minister of the interior, despite having little experience in either field. When the DPA lost the 2013 elections, Berisha used his influence to help Basha become his successor, and Berisha was crucial in convincing the DPA congress to keep Basha as party leader after electoral defeats in 2017 and 2021.

Nonetheless, after weeks of hesitation, Basha convinced a majority of the party's leadership to oust Berisha from the parliamentary group, announcing the decision on the eve of the opening session of the new parliament in September 2021.

Berisha quickly denounced Basha, declaring his expulsion illegal and a violation of party rules. He criticized Kim for interfering in Albania's internal affairs and urged the DPA to reject the decision. He then launched the Refoundation movement with his loyalists in the party. Despite having defended Basha just days earlier, Berisha now blamed him personally for all electoral defeats and denounced him as Rama's puppet. It took weeks for Basha to respond in kind, and by then, Berisha had already completed a national tour, rallying crowds of frustrated Democrats and gaining the upper hand within the party base. Both sides filed lawsuits over ownership of the party's name, seal, and headquarters. The two DPA leaders held parallel national conventions and eventually expelled each other from the party.

This division turned the 2023 local elections into a comprehensive test for the opposition. With the legal battle still ongoing, Basha's group listed its candidates on the ballot under the Democratic Party's name and logo. Berisha's group, with neither time nor desire to found a new party, formed the "Together We Win" coalition with the SMI and two other smaller parties.

The SPA won 54 out of 61 mayoral races. The Together We Win coalition received just 247,880 votes (18.44%) but outperformed the official DPA, which garnered 103,719 votes (7.71%).

On June 11, 2024, the Tirana Court of Appeals ruled that Berisha's group represented the legal leadership of the DPA. The High Court rebuffed a final effort by Basha's group, which had to register as a new political party. They now call themselves the Euro-Atlantic Democrats to emphasize that they represent the only opposition supported by Albania's Western allies. Basha also accused Berisha of turning the DPA into "an anti-American bunker to serve his interests."[9] Berisha, who has been careful to combine his attacks on former Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Soros, and American diplomats with strong support for U.S. positions on other international topics, may be hoping that the return of President Donald Trump to the White House will bring a removal of his designation. His campaign and rhetoric deliberately share some ideological similarities with Trump. Meanwhile, the party has hired political consultant Chris LaCivita, to whom Berisha has referred as the architect of the electoral campaign that brought Trump back to the White House.[10]

Based on the previous election results, neither Berisha's group nor Basha's seem close to winning a majority, and chances of healing the rift before May 11 are nonexistent. However, just before the registration deadline, Berisha gained momentum, forming an electoral coalition of 25 parties and luring some crucial MPs from Basha's circle.

The list includes some insignificant political forces, but in the case of a close race, those few extra votes may prove crucial. More importantly, Berisha proved that he remains the gravitational center of the opposition.

Socialist Movement for Integration and Other Parties

The SMI was founded in 2004 by Ilir Meta, a former prime minister from the SPA. After the 2009 general elections, with just four seats in parliament, the SMI became the kingmaker, delivering a new majority for the ruling DPA and joining the government. Meta was appointed deputy prime minister.

In 2013, the SMI switched alliances, striking a pre-electoral deal with the SPA. It garnered 10% of the vote in that election, enabling SPA to return to power. Meta was elected speaker of parliament, and Rama became prime minister, with five SMI ministers in his Cabinet. Nearly four years later, the same parliament elected Meta as president of Albania.

The 2017 national elections, where the SMI secured 19 seats in parliament with 14% of the vote, marked the peak of the party's influence. Against the odds, Meta and his party demonstrated that it was possible for a third political force to disrupt Albania's traditional two-party dominance. The party's fortunes have declined since then. Even in 2017, despite its strong showing, SMI could no longer play the role of kingmaker, as the SPA secured a majority and went on to rule alone. Meta had stepped back from party politics to serve as president, while his wife and party co-founder, Monika Kryemadhi, took over the leadership. She adopted a more aggressive stance in opposition, abandoning the centrist pragmatism and moderation that had previously characterized the party. She also engaged in dramatic acts, such as throwing a shoe at Rama during a heated parliamentary session. The SMI also aligned with Basha in 2019 when he led the opposition out of parliament and boycotted the following local elections – two self-defeating moves that benefited Rama enormously and were heavily criticized by Albania's NATO and EU partners. In the 2021 national elections, SMI's support dropped to 6.81% of the vote.

When his presidential term concluded, Meta returned to the helm of the party, rebranded it as the Freedom Party (FP), and ousted Kryemadhi. The couple also divorced, citing "personal and political reasons." Both are under investigation for allegedly amassing wealth and assets beyond their means, charges they deny, claiming the investigation is a witch hunt orchestrated by Rama. On Oct. 21, 2024, Meta was arrested and remains in custody. The police action was criticized for using excessive force against an official who had appeared voluntarily whenever summoned by investigators.

The results of the last two elections are critical to understanding the situation of the Albanian opposition. In 2021, the DPA secured 622,265 votes, while the SMI received 107,533. However, only two years later, the combined votes of Berisha's group and the SMI totaled a paltry 247,880, a loss of nearly half a million voters.

Where did these voters go? More than 100,000 probably opted to vote for Basha's version of DPA, but the rest clearly decided to stay home. The disenchanted voters have become targets of new political startups trying to make their mark in Albania, such as Together Movement, the Hashtag Initiative, or Albania Can Be Made. However, their reach is limited, mostly in major urban centers, and they seem unlikely to merge into a larger common front.

A number of small parties could play a kingmaker role or become crucial in the next parliament if there is only a thin majority:

- The Republican Party, a loyal ally of the DPA, is likely to remain in its coalition.
- The Party of the Human Rights Union, primarily representing the Greek minority, has aligned with the DPA in the last local election and may choose to stay close to it again.
- The Movement for National Development is already breaking away from the DPA to form a common front with one of its splinter groups.
- The Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity is a nationalist but pragmatic party that claims to vote based on principle. It has shown flexibility, joining SPA on a couple of important legislative matters. Its support base is largely drawn from the Cham community, whose ancestors were forcibly expelled from Greece in 1944 and seek recognition of their tragedy.

Economy

Albania's post-2020 recovery has been one of the strongest in Europe, primarily fueled by the tourism, construction, and real estate sectors.[11] Since the SPA came to power in 2013, Albania's gross national income (GNI) per capita has risen from $4,540 to $7,570, according to World Bank data.[12] However, economic inequality persists, and critics claim that a handful of "oligarchs" with widespread business interests are stifling competition.

The Albanian lek has appreciated dramatically in comparison to the U.S. dollar and euro, but prices of imported goods continue to rise.[13] Everyday groceries and essential food items have seen price increases over the past two years,[14] prompting Rama to introduce a historic salary increase for teachers and health care workers just before the 2023 local elections. Some of these measures are scheduled to be fully implemented in time for the next general election.

In December 2024, Berisha countered with promises of raising the minimum wage to 500 euros from less than 300, an interesting move to the left by a leader who previously ruled as a free-market conservative in a country where the current socialist government has cozied up to big business.

Truly measuring economic inequality and the overall economic situation is complicated by the persistence of the informal economy and diaspora remittances, which alleviate economic hardship, making it more difficult for the opposition to use the economy as a rallying point for voters.

The continuous rise in real estate prices both benefits and damages the ruling party, and there are concerns that it may be driven by money laundering linked to criminal activities. Revenues from drug trafficking, smuggling, and corrupt practices are allegedly being funneled into the construction and real estate sectors.[15]

Tourism is generating a boost for the economy, similar to what is happening in other Mediterranean countries. Critics note that overtourism, especially along the beaches, endangers the local environment, while the old infrastructure is collapsing. The opposition claims that the government's lack of regulation has also led to inflated prices, keeping most Albanians away from private beaches while public ones have almost disappeared. However, the government considers the new wave of several million more tourists per year among its greatest achievements for bringing jobs, strengthening the local economy, and filling state coffers.[16]

Health Care

Health care is poised to be a critical issue for voters in the 2025 elections. The government has made significant investments, particularly in facilities like the National Trauma Center and the Surgery Department at University Hospital Center Mother Teresa (QSUT), the largest medical center in the country. However, complaints of widespread corruption and poor treatment persist. While public health services are free in Albania, informal payments are reportedly common.

A recent scandal[17] in the QSUT oncology clinic highlighted the systemic issues. Leaked investigation details revealed doctors and nurses casually discussing and charging informal fees for surgical operations that are supposed to be free.[18] This scandal led to arrests and promises of further crackdowns, but corrupt practices remain deeply entrenched. Another criminal incident at a private senior care facility involving dementia patients further exposed the vulnerabilities of Albania's health care system.[19] As more young people emigrate, the elderly are increasingly left without family support, creating a situation in which specialized care is in short supply.

These issues present an opportunity for the opposition to develop a compelling platform focused on health care reform. However, with the election date approaching, there may not be enough time to compile and sell such a platform to voters.

Corruption and Justice Reform

For years, corruption in Albania has been pervasive and largely unpunished. However, U.S.-backed justice reform efforts have brought significant changes, sparking hope for genuine accountability.

One key institution created as a part of these efforts, the Special Court Against Corruption and Organized Crime (SPAK), has particularly captured public attention by leading unprecedented actions against corrupt officials, marking a decisive shift from the first three decades of Albania's post-communist era. In July 2024, for example, former Minister of Agriculture Ilir Beqaj, who served under Rama's first administration, was arrested and charged with misappropriating EU funds. Similarly, Arben Ahmetaj, once Rama's deputy in government and finance minister, fled the country after the parliament lifted his immunity. He faces charges of concealing assets, money laundering, and other corruption-related offenses.[20]

SPAK's most recent target is Tirana Mayor Erion Veliaj, a potential next leader of the SPA after Rama. Veliaj was arrested Feb. 10, 2025, on charges of graft and money laundering and remains in detention until trial. Despite most of SPAK's targets being SPA officials, Rama and his party had remained supportive. However, Veliaj's arrest became a tipping point, with Rama accusing SPAK of overreach and the party organizing a protest to block the entrance of the building in which the entity operates.[21] In the following days, Veliaj used social media to attack the prosecutor, who he claimed has a vendetta over a construction permit. Some media outlets sympathetic to Veliaj followed suit by attacking the prosecutor's personal life and character.

However, Rama moderated his tone on the issue after it became apparent that attacking SPAK could damage the SPA in the upcoming election. Veliaj also moved to positive posts once the Court of Appeal opted to leave him in detention until the trial. He also hired a New York-based law firm known for providing legal counsel to Trump.[22] This development has helped SPAK build its credibility as a politically independent institution. A recent poll showed it enjoys wide support among Albanians.[23]

The moves against corrupt officials are so popular among Albanians that the opposition could have leveraged SPAK's activity alone to build a strong case for electoral victory. However, much of the opposition remains hostile to SPAK because it has also targeted key opposition figures.

In October 2023, SPAK placed Berisha under investigation for "passive corruption" related to a land deal involving his son-in-law.[24] Both were placed under house arrest, although Berisha was released in December 2024. His loyalists called this investigation an instance of political persecution and held daily protests outside Berisha's residence, but the size of the crowds remained small. The Party of Freedom has also been harshly critical of SPAK due to investigations targeting its leaders.

This dynamic has left an opening for other opposition groups like Basha's Euro-Atlantic Democrats, the Together Movement, and the Hashtag Initiative to present themselves as the only clean alternatives in Albanian politics, but they have yet to successfully capitalize on this opportunity.

Checks and Balances

Albania's system of checks and balances is barely functioning, and there is no political will from any side to fix it. According to the Constitution, the Albanian Parliament has the authority to elect or dismiss the prime minister, but in practice, most legislators owe their positions to party leaders.

Despite their political rivalry, Rama and Berisha collaborated to amend the electoral code in July 2024 to strengthen the power of party leaders via preferential electoral lists. In Albania's proportional representation system, party leaders assign favorable ranking positions, ensuring that 80 out of 140 MPs owe their seats to them. As a result, for almost two decades now, Parliament has simply rubber-stamped bills from the prime minister's office.

A striking example of Parliament's failure to assert its independence occurred in early August when Speaker Lindita Nikolla retired. Rather than allowing Parliament to select her replacement, as intended by law, Rama unilaterally announced her successor, Elisa Spiropali, during a party convention. A video from the event showed Spiropali visibly surprised by the announcement.[25]

There has been little balance coming from the president's office as well. When Rama unexpectedly reshuffled the Cabinet on a Friday, Begaj approved the changes over the weekend and convened Parliament for a vote on Monday.[26] Critics in the opposition argued that the president should have taken at least one business day to consider the changes, if only to maintain the appearance of independence.

Key Developments

As the elections approach, several developments could prove crucial to the outcome. One key question is whether Berisha's party – now officially recognized again as the DPA – can maintain internal cohesion while also reintegrating former allies into its ranks and coalition. A balancing act is already in place to keep harmony between loyalists and returning members, but the real test will be the compilation of the MP candidates list. Fresh faces are needed to attract disenchanted voters, yet Berisha is likely to prioritize lieutenants who stood by him over the past three years.

The DPA's electoral program and its presentation will also be important. While detailed, practical solutions tailored to specific socio-economic groups would be more effective, time and attention spans are short. As a result, more hyperbolic promises and a rehash of past rhetoric are likely, particularly denunciations of Rama as a dictator.

Meanwhile, Basha's Euro-Democrats face a pivotal test. Without access to the DPA's headquarters, logo, or state-allocated funds, they must prove they are a viable political force. They need to show that the 130,000 votes they received in the 2023 local elections were not a fluke and that their support base will not simply return to the official DPA. However, internal fractures are emerging, with a group led by one of Basha's close collaborators recently splitting off to form a new party.

Beyond the traditional parties, the question remains whether new political movements – such as the Together Movement, Hashtag Initiative, and Albania Can Be Made – can unite and form a common front. If they manage to attract enough disenchanted voters, they could cross the electoral threshold and secure parliamentary representation.

Finally, it remains to be seen whether the SPA, despite its advantages, can win an outright majority. Even if it secures a narrow victory, it may still need to collaborate with smaller parties on major legislative initiatives. This could, in turn, strengthen checks and balances by restoring greater parliamentary influence – bringing it closer to the role envisioned by the Constitution.



Ruben Avxhiu is the editor in chief of Illyria, a New York-based, nationwide Albanian-American newspaper founded in 1991. He founded the first youth newspaper in post-Communist Albania and went on to become a writer and editor for a number of Albanian newspapers and magazines, including Republika, Albania, Koha, and others, before moving to New York to join Illyria in 1999. His other professional experiences include working at the Center for War, Peace, and the News Media and at New York University. He studied international media and communications at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University.

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Politics and the 2025 Elections – Ruben Avxhiu



The Albanian and European Union flags fly in front of the European Commission building in Brussels.

YasminV / Getty Images

From a European Community Enthusiast To EU Membership

Klodiana Beshku

Albania's journey toward European Union membership has been long and complex. The signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (2006), the achieving of candidate status (2014), the opening of accession negotiations (2022), and the ending of the screening process (2023) have been some of the milestones along the way. Delays often were linked to the need for comprehensive reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law, good governance, and anticorruption. Since it first became a democratic country, Albania has held aspirations of greater Euro-Atlantic integration, with NATO and EU membership as its ultimate goals.

Albania realized one goal by joining NATO in 2009. Today, it remains actively engaged in the negotiation process toward its ambitions for EU membership with two opened clusters, as it works to align its institutions and policies with EU standards in hopes of eventually becoming a full member in 2030. Under these auspices, Prime Minister Edi Rama is running for a fourth mandate in the May 2025 elections.

Albania and the Initial Idea of Europe

European integration has been the destination of all Albanian governments since 1990 because the European Union has always represented a process of both European identification and European transformation for Albanian society. Albanians have always perceived the EU as a gateway to freedom and as a return to their sphere of identity: the European one. Unlike the other five Western Balkan countries, which together with Croatia and Slovenia had all been part of Yugoslavia under Josip Broz Tito in a social communist system of an "unallied bloc," Albania experienced a harsh dictatorship under the communist dictator Enver Hoxha. In this regard, Albania has experienced a different historical pace of a communist past[1] compared with the other Western Balkan countries.

During the period 1990-1991, when the regime broke up, the feeling of belonging to Europe grew even stronger. The long period of isolation[2] and scarcity under the communist regime led Albanians to consider Western Europe to be the sole window to the free movement of people and goods and as a sort of stairway to welfare heaven. Thus, every political struggle at the beginning of the 1990s was completely Europe-oriented, mixing in the same pot, without distinction, the concept of Europe, the European Community, and the Council of Europe.[3] The mantra "*E duam Shqipërinë si gjithë Europa*" of that time[4] referred not only to its literal meaning, "We want Albania as the rest of Europe," but also expressed the idea that Albania had to become like the European Community, join it one day, and have the same living standards and state of mind. Unlike other EU candidates or member countries, no Albanian political party opposes or criticizes the idea of EU integration. European integration represents the only area where a political consensus is found in Albania.[5] Only recently has criticism been made more often by experts, members of think tanks, and members of civil society, and it has mostly been directed at the Open Balkans initiative of 2021-2022, which caused concern for not being directly under the European Union umbrella.

The European Community has supported Albania's path to democracy since the beginning of the 1990s. The first discussion about Albania in the European Parliament took place on Feb. 21, 1991, two days after the Albanian people had destroyed Hoxha's statue in Tirana after a mass demonstration. In the debate, terms like "reunification with Europe" and "insertion in Europe" were used, an approach mostly supported by the Italian and German deputies.[6] The role of the European Commission as a supporter of the fragile Albanian democracy was made possible through programs such as TEMPUS-PHARE and later, CARDS and IPA.[7] This kind of support for conditionality remains crucial for the EU's approach to Albania and will continue to do so in the future.

In the 1990s, Albania was facing a difficult transition from a centralized to a market economy. In the years immediately after the fall of its communist regime, the country was subject to economic shocks[8] that, combined with its social and political struggles, caused a nearly total collapse of the Albanian state after the pyramid scheme crisis of 1996-1997 was allowed to flourish by the government led by then-Prime Minister Sali Berisha. During that crisis, Albania's economy regressed to the levels of the early 1990s, and the state system experienced corruption, was unable to attract economic investment, and had weak rule of law, which created conditions for a long transition period.

While other countries in the region were involved in ethnic conflicts during the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia (1991-1999), Albania signed the Agreement on Commerce and Economic Cooperation with the European Community in 1992. Albania was the first country in the region to sign this kind of bilateral agreement,[9] which marked its first formal step in establishing closer ties with Europe, together with becoming part of the Council of Europe in 1995. Nevertheless, for Albania, the European integration process started to have its ups and downs, most of which were related to its domestic sphere and policies. However, one thing has remained unchanged: Since 1990, European integration has consistently been a national objective and the main axis of Albania's foreign policy strategy.[10]

From the Bilateral to the Regional Phase

The signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) was completed on June 12, 2006. It marked Albania's move away from the bilateral to the regional phase in its European integration path. This milestone finally brought Albania to the accession track[11] and made it the third Western Balkans country to sign the SAA. The negotiations had taken 3 1/2 years, three times longer than they took for Croatia and the former Republic of Macedonia. The close relations between Albania and the EU under the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP), which started in 1999, were finalized with the 2007 negotiations for the SAA between the EU and Albania. After two years, the inception of the SAA on April 1, 2009, signified a more advanced contractual relationship between Albania and the EU, with mutual obligations and rights delineated. This new agreement began in December 2006, seeking to gradually integrate the country's political, economic, and social institutions with those of the EU. The SAP and the SAA were "purely regional in character,"[12] given that they moved from bilateral trade liberalization to regional cooperation and harmonizing with EU structures,[13] as well as regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries.

After making progress toward European integration, Albania was admitted to NATO on April 1, 2009. Visas between the EU and Albania were formally liberalized in December

2010. The opening of negotiations with the European Commission over the country's status as candidate member on Oct. 10, 2012, fell on the 100th anniversary of Albania's independence. An EU progress report in November 2012 was received with celebration by the government of the Democratic Party in Albania, which labeled the future after the report "the next hundred years of Albania."[14]

However, since then, Albania's path to European integration has not been smooth or easy. The EC's 2013 Enlargement Strategy featured fundamentals that outlined the key topics on the enlargement agenda: the rule of law, economic governance, and strengthening democratic institutions. The last achievement preceding EU integration was the decision of the EU General Affairs Council on June 24, 2014, granting Albania candidate status, which was supported on June 27, 2014, by the European Commission. Nearly a decade would pass before Albania would take another significant step toward European integration.

From Bad Pupil to Master of Regional Cooperation, 2012-2019

On Sept. 13, 2014, in an unprecedented move, newly elected European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker announced a five-year halt on EU enlargement in his "State of the EU" speech to the European Parliament. This declaration persistently discouraged the Western Balkan countries by distancing them from EU membership prospects. It also led to the realization that long-term stability and a transformation of the region would be best achieved through economic growth and stronger regional cooperation, resulting in the so-called Berlin Process[15] launched by German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014 to fill the vacuum left in the region by Juncker. This process consisted of successive Western Balkan summits, where six EU member states (Austria, Croatia, France, Germany, Italy, and Slovenia) and the six Western Balkan countries agreed to increase cooperation on several issues. Albania and the other Western Balkan countries engaged in discussions of soft and hard measures in regional cooperation, which were supposed to speed up European integration and regional cooperation in this process, according to the example of the Višegrad Group.

Under this process, Tirana became the seat of two regional initiatives in the process framework – the Western Balkan Fund and the Regional Youth Cooperation Office – fulfilling its aspiration to become a regional hub and to be actively engaged in the region. With this political momentum, Albania, along with the other countries of the Western Balkans, officially passed from the first phase of the bilateral agreements with the EU and the second phase of the regional approach with the SAP to the third phase of the Berlin Process, during which it proved to be a constructive factor of regional cooperation in the region.

From the New Enlargement Methodology to a New Pace in European Integration, 2019-2023

Albania, together with North Macedonia, underwent an accession impasse between 2018 and 2021 as the European Council transformed the accession process from a technical into a political one.[16] In July 2016, Albania adopted comprehensive justice reform, which was supposed to pave the way for negotiations between Albania and the EU, but the opening of the access negotiations was twice postponed. The European Commission gave the positive *avis* to the opening of accession negotiations with Albania in 2018 and 2019, but the efforts for thorough judicial reform did not pay off. This neglect gave way to a decision-making process regarding these countries that continued for nearly four years.

After the European Council had blocked the process for both Albania and North Macedonia with the vetoes of 2018 and 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted on linking enlargement to reforming the whole SAP, managing to achieve a reconsideration of the latter. In February 2020, the European Commission approved a revised methodology for the enlargement process, and the accession negotiations process seemed to restart.[17] The presentation of a new methodology of enlargement was made in February 2020, and the next month, the European Council decided to formally open accession negotiations with both countries. Nevertheless, the intergovernmental conference that would have meant the formal start of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia was once more blocked in June 2021 by Bulgaria's veto of North Macedonia, which was related to historical legacies between the two.

This second halt of European integration for the region opened the way to a new regional initiative in the framework of a "Western Balkans for the Western Balkans" approach.[18] Given that the governments of the Western Balkans had started to consider the Berlin Process as a substitute for EU enlargement,[19] on the initiative of the leaders of Albania, Serbia, and North Macedonia, the "Mini Schengen" initiative of 2019 was turned into the Open Balkans initiative in 2021, aiming at closer collaboration among the three countries in the free movement of goods, people, and capital, independently from the EU. The "soft pressure" that Albania and Serbia were putting on the EU through these individual initiatives seemed to finally work. The Bulgarian veto was overcome, and the first intergovernmental conferences opening the accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania took place in Brussels in July 2022.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Western Balkans became a contentious geopolitical sphere of influence for the European Union. On Oct. 6, 2023, at an informal meeting of heads of state in Granada, EU leaders declared that enlargement was a "geostrategic investment in peace, security, stability and prosperity."[20] The Berlin Process Summit convened in Tirana on Oct. 16, 2023, marking its first time in the region. That meeting achieved progress on the Common Regional Market and enabled participants to discuss the coming New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and to open the Office of the College of Europe in Tirana, along with enrolling students for the 2024-2025 academic year. The site of the meeting demonstrated the EU's complete advocacy for Western Balkan countries joining the EU.

In this regard, the New Growth Plan for the Western Balkans, proposed by the European Commission in November 2023, resembles a European Union Marshall Plan for the Western Balkans. It will provide increased financial investment and loans for a total of 6 billion euros for the period 2024-2027 in exchange for socioeconomic and fundamental reforms.[21] The first direct effect of this plan was the inclusion of Montenegro and Albania in the Single European Payments Area, being the first-ever enlargement of countries to join this area. In line with the Growth Plan, Albania presented an ambitious Reform Agenda in October 2024[22] to the European Commission and expects to become a member of the European Union by 2030.

Recent Developments

After one year of the screening process (2022-2023),[23] Albania opened the EU negotiations on the Fundamentals (First) Cluster at the beginning of October 2024 and opened them for the Sixth Cluster, on External Relations, in mid-December 2024. The opening of both clusters demonstrates a strategic and well-thought-out move by the Albanian side.

The First Cluster, on Fundamentals and Functioning of Democratic Institutions, opens first and closes last. It is thought that judicial reform will advantage Albania's position well compared with other countries in the region. Albania constitutes a good example of a *reformateur* under the EU's oversight related to the reform of the justice system because the rule of law is a crucial prerequisite for healthy institutions, the consolidation of democracy, and the economic development of a country on its way to joining the EU. Although the Special Prosecution against Corruption and Organized Crime – a body created in the process of justice reform – has delivered on several high-profile cases regarding former ministers, members of parliament, a deputy member of parliament, municipalities, directors, and other high-profile officials, corruption remains an area of concern in Albania. The reform required all prosecutors to submit to a vetting process, which is at the end in the first instance, a fact that represents a major milestone, with 11 remaining cases out of 805 as of Oct. 3, 2024. For the first time,[24] Albania was included in the Rule of Law Report of the European Commission. The report highlights the fact that the new Anti-Corruption Strategy for 2024-2030 is being prepared, while the implementation of the current strategy has faced shortcomings.[25]

The Sixth Cluster covers several important aspects of foreign policy, including Albania's alignment with EU policies on international relations, trade, and diplomatic affairs. Albania is a good example of a *reformateur* under the EU, comprising the areas of foreign policy that represent full alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy[26] and good regional relations following the Berlin process series. Albania is considered a stabilizing factor in the region and a champion of regional cooperation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Albania remains actively engaged in the process of EU accession, working to align its institutions and policies with EU standards as it hopes eventually to become a full EU member. Albania has tried to play a major role in the geopolitical environment of the region and conflict zones all over the world through U.N. and NATO bodies. The fact that Albania is a U.S. ally and is committed to the EU is well known in the EU's member states. Despite challenges and backsliding, Albania has done everything right from a formal perspective: It is already a NATO member, is free from the complications of the Yugoslav wars, has no bilateral disputes, and is a strong ally of the U.S. and Italy with a perfect geopolitical position. Thus, it is well positioned to contribute to the stability of the Western Balkans. As its accession process is well on track and it is one of the countries supported by the EU's New Growth Plan, the chances of Albania achieving its goal to become an EU member by 2030 appear promising.

Nevertheless, it faces several remaining multifaceted challenges with political, economic, social, and institutional dimensions. Corruption remains deeply ingrained; thus, the state and society must make joint efforts to curb it, including the vigilant enforcement of anticorruption laws.

Other challenges include concerns about the intersection of business and political interests and market concentration,

which were expressed by the European Commission in 2022. The 2022 European Commission Report on Albania suggested that anticorruption measures continued to have a limited impact in particularly vulnerable areas like property, roads, cadaster, customs, tax administration, education, health, and public procurement and that the country should step up efforts on the alignment of its legislative framework with the EU in the areas of concessions and public-private partnerships. There has been a suspension of the EU's Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance for Rural Development payments due to doubts about corruption, a preventive measure taken by the EC after an investigation by the European Anti-Fraud Office on suspected misuse of EU funds supporting farmers and the agricultural sector. There have also been concerns in the area of freedom of expression and media freedom. Concern has been expressed about improving the protection of fundamental rights by fully aligning the law on personal data protection with the EU acquis, adopting pending legislation on the rights of persons belonging to minorities, and effectively implementing the EC's 2024 National Agenda on Child Rights.

Fear about formal compliance with EU norms remains, since European integration should be transformative for Albania, not merely a formal destination to be achieved. The judicial system also needs strengthening to make it more independent, efficient, and accountable. Albania must meet these challenges to increase its credibility and its readiness to join the EU. Albania's slow economic development, lack of free elections, and high-level corruption have been its main problems during its long road to joining the EU.



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Adnan Beci / AFP via Getty Images

An Albanian opposition MP lights smoke bombs during a parliamentary session in Tirana on Dec. 7, 2023.

A Disastrously Successful Judicial Reform

Neritan Sejamini

In June 2024, Albanians were shocked when anticorruption officials arrested Aurel Zarka, the chief prosecutor of Vlora District, one of the most important in the country. Zarka, who had just weeks before comfortably passed a vetting process intended to rid the judicial branch of criminally compromised prosecutors, was charged with colluding with drug traffickers. Ironically, the vetting process has been a main component of ongoing justice reform in Albania, as was the establishment of the special prosecution unit that ordered Zarka's arrest.

This development showed the two sides of the reform that is still dividing Albanians, almost a decade since its start. Some consider it a failure because of the disruption of due process that it has brought about, while others believe it has started to bring the desired results in fighting high-level corruption. However, there has been no objective account or analysis of this consequential reform. This essay attempts to highlight some of the main issues in its design and implementation.

A Noble Undertaking

Albania's justice reform has been promoted by the country's government as a success story. In 2013, the country was plagued by endemic corruption and a weak rule of law that hurt people and stalled European integration. Albania's foreign partners had little to show for billions of dollars and two and half decades of continued efforts to build democracy and strengthen the country's rule of law. Short of new ideas, they embraced the latest fad in international democracy assistance: judicial reform. Drawing upon the existing public distrust of the judiciary, foreign diplomats portrayed judges and prosecutors as villains who were causing all of Albania's ills. The solution was justice reform, which – as portrayed by Donald Lu, the former U.S. ambassador to Albania – was the only "opportunity of ridding the Albanian judiciary of corrupt judges and prosecutors who [stole] the money of ordinary citizens and [allowed] organized crime figures, murderers, and corrupt politicians to buy justice."[1] The rationale for the reform was simple: Start by cleaning up the judiciary, and then the judiciary takes on corrupt politicians and organized crime, restoring the rule of law and well-being of people.

Since the fall of communism in 1990, two parties have dominated Albanian politics: the Socialist Party and the right-wing Democratic Party. They have taken turns holding power, each promising to strengthen the rule of law and fight corruption, but each has ended up consumed by corruption and scandals. The 2013 parliamentary elections ended eight years of rule by the Democratic Party and brought the Socialists, which campaigned on an anti-authoritarianism and anticorruption platform, back to power. The European Commission saw an opportunity to condition the country's negotiations to join the European Union with the approval of thorough judicial reform, using "institutional, legislative, and procedural measures."[2] The new Socialist government seized the opportunity to lay claim to the reform and made it its highest priority. The Democrats, in opposition, were wary that the government could use the reform to seize control of the judiciary, so they initially resisted the effort, but under pressure from the EU and the United States, they reluctantly joined it.

In November 2014, an ad hoc parliamentary justice reform committee was established, assisted by a group of domestic and foreign experts. A reform strategy and a package of constitutional amendments were submitted to Parliament in July 2015. Then came a year of political handwringing and difficult negotiations, before Parliament unanimously approved 46 constitutional amendments, laying the infrastructure for a new justice system. A set of laws providing the legal framework for organizing and managing the new judiciary was enacted soon after, passed by the Socialist majority after the opposition boycotted the vote.

Justice reform had three goals: to guarantee the independence of the judiciary from political interference; to cleanse the system of corrupt and incompetent magistrates; and to strengthen the fight against corruption and organized crime. To achieve these goals, all existing judicial and prosecutorial institutions were reformed or abolished, and new institutions were established. The judiciary's governance was entrusted to three new independent bodies: the High Judicial Council and the High Council of Prosecutors, which were responsible for standards and career management, and the Office of the High Inspector of Justice, which was responsible for disciplinary proceedings against judges and prosecutors at all levels. Two specialized independent institutions – the Special Prosecution Against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) and the Special Courts Against Corruption and Organized Crime – would deal with high-level corruption and organized crime. A full-fledged vetting of all sitting judges and prosecutors at all levels was also instituted; this was conducted by two ad hoc bodies assisted by the International Observing Mission appointed by the European Commission.

An Imposed Reform

Albania's justice reform was assisted and financed by its foreign partners, primarily the EU and the United States, whose experts had a leading role in the reform's design and implementation.[3] The EU and the U.S. also pressured all parliamentary parties to approve the reform.

This was arguably the most radical reform in scope and extent that has been implemented in Albania since the end of communist, one-party rule. One-third of the Albanian Constitution was amended, more than 40 laws and legal amendments were enacted,[4] and hundreds of rules and regulations were adopted. Every institution at every level of the justice system was affected. Short of an entirely new Constitution, such a transformation of any country's Constitution and legislation was hardly precedented.[5] As praised by its prime movers, the EU and the U.S., the reform was indeed "revolutionary" and "historic and unprecedented [in] magnitude."[6]

This reform also featured probably the most sweeping judicial vetting ever implemented. Partial judicial vetting had been used before in other countries as a transitional justice mechanism.[7] But Albania's vetting was full-fledged: All judges and all prosecutors at all levels, more than 800 people in total, were assessed on three fundamental aspects: wealth, competence, and integrity. The European Commission for Democracy through Law, a group of legal experts also known as the Venice Commission, considered the level of vetting a radical measure but relented that it might be appropriate and necessary, given the high level of corruption in the Albanian judiciary. However, the commission underscored the risk that vetting disrupts the course of justice and creates opportunities for the judiciary to be captured by the political force that controls the process.[8] On paper, the Albanian reform also aimed to insulate the judiciary from other branches of government – it was intentionally designed to exclude

any significant involvement by outside institutions in the judiciary's governance.

In fact, the reform's designers had set out to achieve two arguably conflicting goals: securing the judiciary's complete independence from political interference while at the same time avoiding an unaccountable judiciary. To this end, they divided governance responsibilities among several separate institutions within the system to avoid a concentration of power and introduced interdependence among these institutions in the form of checks and balances. For example, the nine members of the Constitutional Court are nominated by the Judicial Appointments Council. Three of them are confirmed by the High Court, three by Parliament, and three by the president. The members of the High Judicial Council, which appoints members of the High Court, are elected by all sitting judges and several external nonpolitical institutions.

Given this unique approach and its inventive elements, Albanian justice reform was by design a risky experiment. As described by Andrea Mazelliu, a lecturer in law at New York University in Tirana, it sent Albania into uncharted waters.[9] And it has been a troublesome voyage.

Overhauling the System

Justice reform started with the constitutionally mandated vetting process required of all new judicial appointments. Legal challenges and political infighting delayed this process, which then moved slowly,[10] mainly due to a lack of resources. About 60% of the personnel who underwent vetting were dismissed or resigned.

Due to the protracted vetting process, the three new judicial governance institutions were created almost three years past the constitutional deadline to do so.[11] Such delays, combined with the huge number of vetting dismissals, left vacancies throughout the judicial system. The nine-member Constitutional Court and 19-member High Court were left with one member each. The Constitutional Court remained paralyzed from May 2018 to December 2020, while the High Court's paralysis lasted from May 2019 through March 2020. And that court was left mostly nonfunctional for two more years after that. It was the first time in modern history that a nation had no functioning supreme courts.

The situation was grave throughout the judiciary as vacancies decapitated all the country's courts. "Moving from corrupt courts to no courts at all was not an adequate solution" for successful reform, noted Megi Bakiasi, an Albanian legal scholar.[12] Ylli Manjani, a former minister of justice, described the reform results with a medical witticism: "The operation was successful, but the patient died."[13]

This unforeseen turn of events shifted the reform's focus to saving the judiciary from the collapse brought on by the reform itself. In this rescue mission, numerous constitutional and legal violations were committed; "temporary," legally dubious mechanisms were employed; and legal loopholes were utilized.[14] Foreign partners who were at least partially responsible for the reform's failings often proposed and defended these infringements.[15] Thus, reform to restore the rule of law turned into a series of violations of the rule of law.

The Albanian government and the international community framed this grave situation as just a few temporary setbacks and consistently sought to redirect public attention to the process rather than the outcomes. They lauded the enormous number of vetting dismissals and praised the formal establishment of the new judicial institutions, ignoring the reform's impact on people's lives.

Assessing the Reform's Results

The economist Milton Friedman once called the judging of policies and programs by their intentions rather than their results the biggest mistake in policymaking. A policy may look reasonable on paper and still fail in practice, hurting instead of helping people. Now that justice reform is all but complete, it is time to look beyond its intentions to its results: What is people's access to justice in Albania now? What about the fight against corruption? Do people trust the new judiciary? What about the rule of law?

During 2023, of the 408 judges authorized in the judiciary, only 247 were effectively in office. In particular, the 102 seats available in the courts of appeals were filled by only 46 judges – a vacancy rate of 55%.[16] The statistics would have been worse, but in 2023 the government implemented judicial remapping – opposed by human rights nongovernmental organizations, trial lawyers' groups, and the political opposition – that reduced the number of courts in an effort to mitigate the problem of vacancies. The number of first-instance courts was reduced from 22 to 12, and of appeals courts from five to one.[17] While this lowered the number of judgeships in the system, it simultaneously reduced access to judicial services and increased costs for those using the courts. It is also worth noting that 45% of all sitting judges have been appointed in the past four years, and almost all of them are first-time judges fresh from the Magistrates School and thus have limited professional skills.

The case backlog remains serious. At the beginning of 2024, Albania's High Court had a caseload of almost 26,000,[18] which at the current rate will take more than five years to clear. A current case reaching the High Court today is expected to take about five to eight years to be reviewed. The General Court of Appeals had a backlog of almost 38,000 cases, and the Administrative Court of Appeals had one of more than 23,000 cases – and both are increasing. These backlogs may need seven to 10 years to clear.

In the meantime, substantive progress in the fight against high-level corruption remains elusive. When SPAK was established five years ago, the moment was lauded as the beginning of the end of impunity. Its prosecutors and investigators were given special protection, resources, and assistance to prosecute corrupt politicians and organized crime. This mission has indeed been fulfilled in some cases: Dozens of high- and mid-level politicians, including several former ministers, have been investigated, and a few have been convicted. Even though most investigations started only after those officials had left office, their prosecutions boosted SPAK's credibility. But then SPAK failed at what matters most: facing real power and investigating those in the highest offices.

In recent years, Albania has been hit by several grand corruption scandals related to decisions made at the highest levels of both central and local governments. However, despite years of investigations, so far SPAK has not investigated the role of the prime minister and his top aides in their dealings, focusing instead on underlings. Critics allege that SPAK has stalled investigations because of political pressure. Whatever the truth, one thing seems clear: Public confidence in SPAK and its independence from the government have been shaken.

Indeed, eight years after the start of justice reform efforts, the public's perception of Albania's corruption problem has worsened. It ranked 98th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index, significantly worse than in 2016, when it ranked 83rd out of 176 countries.[19] Recently, the U.S. Department of State called Albania a difficult place to do business, with investors citing public corruption and a weak judiciary as the main challenges.[20]

Public trust in the judiciary has sunk to almost pre-reform levels. According to the European Commission's Balkan Barometer, in 2023, 74% of Albanians distrusted the judiciary, a slight improvement from in 2016, when it was 81%.[21] Almost 58% of Albanians believe that the Special Courts Against Corruption and Organized Crime are influenced by politics, and 47% think the same of SPAK.[22]

What Went So Wrong?

In hindsight, some of the problems arising from the judicial reform process could have been foreseen and failures could have been avoided with strategic and scenario planning. But the reform was conceived as a shopping list of measures to be implemented à la carte, and thus committed a common mistake in policymaking: not recognizing the difference between policies conceived on paper and their implementation in practice, where unforeseen dynamics and unexpected consequences often arise. The rush to reform – an overreaching, complex, inventive reform designed in only seven months – did not help to avoid this pitfall.

But the fundamental flaw of the reform was that it was based on a narrow technocratic-legalistic vision of justice. To its architects, Albania's justice problems were technical and therefore could be solved with technical remedies. The renowned development economist William Easterly calls this a cooking recipe approach: If you get the ingredients right, you get the dish right. Similarly, this justice reform focused on system design – devising the right institutional framework and the right operational rules. Its prime movers, European and American diplomats and bureaucrats, believed they could shape Albania's judiciary by changing laws and organizational structures, despite the country's political culture and specifics.

Vincent van Gerven Oei, a Dutch scholar and astute observer of Albania's justice reform, noted that the reformers ignored the underlying fact that "the rule of law" is a *political* and not a *legal* concept,[23] which pertains to the way power is organized and exercised in society. Separation of powers and judicial independence are fundamentally political principles for organizing the government, and they cannot be achieved outside the structure of power.

Along these same lines, the Georgian law professor Vakhushti Menabde has emphasized that the "independence of the judiciary from political and group influence and return [of justice] to the service of people cannot be achieved through technical discussions and technical reforms but through political reflection upon the question of power."[24] Such a reflection did not happen when Albania's judicial reform was conceived, despite some recognition that there were problems in the justice system.[25] On the contrary, the reform's designers treated it as just another public institution rather than one of the three branches of power. Therefore, despite its constitutional revisions, the reform's focus remained on the framework of *juridification* – on detailing rules and legal regulations – without touching the structure of political power. This was also the reason the reform's

design was entrusted to experts in the first place, ignoring the formal political process.

However, behind the technical facade, heavy politicking and efforts to influence the content of reform on behalf of group and individual interests ensued. First, both the political majority and the opposition tried to use the reform to gain influence over the judiciary – the Socialist majority held all the levers of power, and there was a general perception that it achieved significant control over the new institutions of justice.[26]

For the European Commission, the reform was a prop for Albania's stalled EU integration process and a way to increase its influence over Albania's politics.[27] Likewise, the U.S. administration believed that having influence over the new judiciary would help it push efforts against organized crime, trafficking, and corruption in Albania, all of which were important for domestic and regional stability in the Balkans.[28]

At a lower level, personal ambitions and interests were also at play. Some of the domestic experts involved saw the reform as a stepping stone to careers in the judiciary – indeed, several later-occupied positions they had assisted in designing.[29] The EU and U.S. ambassadors to Albania, both serving their first ambassadorial appointments, aggressively rushed reform's design and approval,[30] wanting to see tangible results before their respective tours were over.[31]

Such legitimate interests would not have undermined the quality of the reform if it had been designed in a transparent and participatory manner. But the reform's design was a closed affair involving a small group of people, all of them part of Albania's legal and political elite. These high-level experts were in fact the "usual experts," the same people who had designed every past constitutional and legal reform in Albania. Ironically, many of them had been or were key figures in the ailing justice system they were tasked to reform and save.[32] Also, all members of the parliamentary committee responsible for drafting the reform had served in key positions in past governments that were accused of encroaching on the judiciary. Not least important, with few exceptions, all the experts and politicians who designed the reform had been educated under the communist legal education system. Essentially, the mission to create the new judicial system was entrusted to those who had created or governed the old one – the establishment was called to arms to "overthrow" itself.

An insightful sentence from Inva Nela, a policy analyst, perfectly summarizes the main causes of reforms failings: "The short time was allocated to complete deep changes, [ignoring] the socio-cultural context, the oversized role of current political elites in the design and implementation [of the reform], the overriding of good governance [considerations] by other strategic priorities, insufficient involvement of the citizens and an overestimation of the country's abilities to produce new qualified members of the judiciary willing to become part of the new institutions."[33]

In 2013, before the justice reform was conceived, Joaquin Urias, the outgoing head of the EU's Assistance Mission to the Albanian Justice System, observed that efforts to reform the Albanian judiciary always fail for the reason that "they are not taken because Albania wants them but because the European Union demands them." The Albanian authorities, which do not want to improve the judiciary, undertake only superficial efforts in order "to give candy to the European Union." Urias underlined that the European Commission, which "operates on political interests," hides its political stances by presenting them as technical views. "That is the reason the Commission tries to highlight progress even when there is none – it is politically interested in keeping Albania motivated and hopeful of its EU membership."[34]

It seems that Urias foretold the destiny of the justice reform that was to come. For all that matters, it is time for the European Union and the United States to pass up "candy" and reach for the bitter pill of reality. They should admit justice reform's failures and should recommit their support to consolidating its achievements: The new judiciary governance institutions should commit to good governance practices; a cleaner judiciary, now made up of mostly young magistrates, should develop its professional capacities; and, most importantly, SPAK should take the leap to investigate the highest levels of government.

Albanians overwhelmingly supported justice reform because of their belief that the EU and the U.S. would guarantee the integrity and the independence of the new judiciary. This is, of course, a naive belief, but it shouldn't be all in vain.

Rule of Law and Corruption – Neritan Sejamini



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Sean Gallup / AFP via Getty Images

Albanian and British vehicles take part in NATO'ss "Brilliant Jump" military exercises in February 2024 in Poland.

Albania Redefined: NATO and the Security Architecture Shaping Tirana's Foreign Policy

Akri Çipa

In recent years, Albania has adopted a more proactive attitude in its foreign policy, exemplified both by the holding of leadership roles in multilateral initiatives and organizations and an increased contribution to regional dialogue and cooperation. In many ways, this momentum can be traced back to 2009, when the country officially became a NATO member. Since then, Albania has increasingly played an important role in the security environment of the Western Balkans. This essay highlights the pillars and transformation of Albania's foreign policy, explores how its membership in NATO aligns with its foreign policy in the last decade, and evaluates its overall role in enhancing security and regional cooperation in the Balkans.

NATO Membership as a Pillar of Albania's Security Posture

While NATO membership has broadly shaped the security landscape for most countries in the Balkans, for Albania it has been the most transformative development in its realignment with the Euro-Atlantic community after almost 45 years of anti-Western sentiment and international isolation. Today, NATO has not only redefined Albania's security and foreign policy orientation but also serves as an anchor of stability.

Surrounded by other NATO allies and Kosovo – which has a predominantly ethnic Albanian population and a strong NATO presence – Albania benefits both directly and indirectly from NATO's influence and footprint. The alliance's presence contributes to a more secure environment, deters regional conflicts, and has paved the way for greater cooperation among the neighboring countries, extending beyond security issues.

Since joining NATO in 2009, Albania has undertaken military reforms to align its defense capabilities with NATO standards. During these years, successive governments have invested in modernizing the military, improving its defense capabilities, and aligning with the alliance's spending requirements.

Albania has shown significant growth in its defense expenditures, particularly in recent years. Albania's defense expenditures as a share of gross domestic product (GDP) increased[1] from 1.35% in 2014 to an estimated 2.03% in 2024. This represents a substantial increase in the defense budget and an alignment with NATO's guideline of spending 2% of GDP on defense. In absolute terms, the total expenditures on Albanian defense rose from $150 million in 2014 to an estimated $309 million in 2024, representing a real change of 106.27% over the decade.

At the same time, Albania has actively participated in NATO missions over the years. During the war in Afghanistan, Albania contributed troops to the Resolute Support Mission.[2] Similarly, Albania has taken part in NATO's noncombat advisory mission in Iraq, focused on building more effective security institutions and combating terrorism, as well in the multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria[3] and Estonia,[4] an important element of the alliance's deterrence posture on its eastern flank. Most importantly, in the regional context, Albania contributes troops to peacekeeping operations through the NATO Mission in Kosovo.[5]

Albania's Growing Contribution in NATO

As a small country with a still-underdeveloped economy compared with its European peers, Albania's direct contribution to the alliance, in terms of both financing and troops, is limited. Moreover, the fact that Albania is itself surrounded by NATO allies and Kosovo makes it less appealing for the country and its citizens to exponentially increase defense spending or expand its armed forces.

Therefore, to contribute to NATO, Albania has prioritized participating in alliance missions and exercises, enhancing interoperability with NATO forces, and contributing indirectly to the alliance's logistical and operational capabilities. In 2018, this contribution was acknowledged by then-U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who said Albania "punches above its weight."[6]

The most important success on this end was the reopening of the Kuçova airbase,[7] with $50 million in funding from NATO, to serve the alliance's air operations. The airbase, a communist-era relic, faced significant infrastructural amortization after the fall of communism. Modernizing the airbase and making it fully functional again was a high priority for the Albanian government in its efforts to strengthen its role and security position in the Balkan and Mediterranean region.

The Albanian government has similarly invited the alliance to either build a NATO naval base or modernize one of the existing structures and adapt it to the needs of the organization. This invitation was reiterated by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama in the opening ceremony of the Kuçova base in March 2024. Initially, the existing Pashaliman naval base in Vlora, another base dating back to the communist era, was proposed, with Porto Romano near Durrës mentioned as a potential later option.[8]

What the Kuçova airbase and the proposed naval base show is Tirana's inclination to leverage its geographic location and geopolitical situation to bring added value to and strengthen its role within NATO.

This approach is complemented by the fact that the country's territory has become an important component of NATO's large-scale joint military exercises. Since 2021, Albania has become an integral host of the Defender-Europe exercises, an annual U.S. Army-led multinational event focused on building operational readiness and interoperability among NATO allies. The 2024 edition represented one of the largest military drills in the Western Balkans since World War II.[9] These exercises have also served to highlight the continued and growing military partnership between Albania and the United States.

Path Toward EU Accession

Membership in NATO was one of two strategic objectives for Albania's political leaders after the fall of communism. The other one, accession to the European Union, remains a work in progress.

Albania was granted EU candidate status in June 2014, and it officially opened accession negotiations in 2020, with the first EU-Albania intergovernmental conference held in July 2022. However, an unjustified unilateral veto from Greece blocked Albania from opening its first cluster of negotiating chapters until October 2024.[10]

Albania's pace of institutional reforms, underdeveloped economy, and persistent systemic issues such as corruption have slowed its EU integration. The EU also has wavered in recent years on the issue of enlargement after the Great Recession and the 2015 migration crisis. Countries such as France insisted that the union reform itself as well as the accession process before allowing other candidate countries to become full members, and Paris vetoed Albania's and North Macedonia's opening of accession talks in 2019.[11]

While support for enlargement has received some traction recently, there are still questions as to whether EU members have the political will to ultimately add the remaining countries in the Balkans as full-fledged members. Serbia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Hercegovina have similarly been left in limbo.

Champion of Regional Cooperation?

Faced with an evolving European security landscape, and with the prospects of an uncertain path to full EU membership, Albania has calibrated its foreign policy to two main themes: regional integration and multilateralism.

Albania has made significant strides in improving diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. These efforts include bilateral security agreements and collaborative initiatives, especially under the auspices of European Union integration. To mitigate the negative effects of the EU's lack of clarity concerning enlargement, Brussels has adopted a policy focused on deeper economic integration between the six Balkan countries that are still not members of the EU. This was the stated goal behind the Berlin Process launched by then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2014.[12]

Albania was one of the early supporters of the initiative. The promise of enhanced connectivity, development, and cooperation was enticing, and it was in line with Albania's efforts to assert itself in the regional context. Moreover, the Berlin Process was touted as an initiative that could contribute to dialogue and reconciliation.

This situation aligned well with Albania's foreign policy mantra of having "zero issues with our neighbors." Tirana's thorniest relationship at the time was with Belgrade, after Serbia's ethnic cleansing campaign against Albanians in Kosovo in the 1990s and its intransigence toward Kosovo's independence. Considering the new political climate, immediately after the launch of the Berlin Process in November 2014, Rama visited Belgrade, the first time an Albanian leader had been to Serbia in 68 years, in an effort to usher in a thaw in relations between the two countries. The visit, coupled with the European initiative, seemed to pave the way for peace and stability in the region.

When, after an initially promising start, the Berlin Process lost momentum, Albania teamed up with Serbia and North Macedonia to launch the "Open Balkan Initiative." Initiated as the "mini-Schengen" and later rebranded,[13] the Open Balkan Initiative aimed to create a smaller version of the EU's border-free Schengen area. The European Union and member states were invited to participate but were not the driving force behind it.

The three founders of this new initiative argued that the platform would contribute to regional stability by promoting economic growth. Modeled as a regional economic zone, the foundational argument was that it would facilitate free movement of goods, services, people, and capital. Ultimately, by fostering economic integration, its proponents claimed that the initiative would help reduce tensions and increase political cooperation in the Western Balkans.

Rama's close relationship with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić paved the way for Albania to embrace a particular role in fostering close relations with Serbia. This was met with skepticism both in Albania and in Kosovo, considering the aggressive rhetoric and destabilizing actions Serbia continues to employ toward its southern neighbor. While Rama argued for the need to foster reconciliation and regional integration, Albania strategically aligned itself with the U.S. and EU prerogative of anchoring Serbia in the West. This approach was seen in both Washington and Brussels as a way to counter the potential of the Kremlin and other foreign players to exploit Serbia as their gateway to the Balkans. Unfortunately, this outcome has yet to materialize, given Belgrade's close cooperation with Moscow and its growing economic and political ties with Beijing.

The Open Balkan Initiative ultimately fizzled. The other three non-EU members of the region – Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro – were skeptical about Serbia's dominance within the initiative and refused to join it. Without EU safeguards and tools to guarantee economic convergence, they feared that Serbia would exploit its position as the larger market and stronger economy. They also questioned Serbia's political intentions behind the initiative, particularly given Belgrade's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence and its repeated challenges to the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Interestingly, it was Rama who effectively marked its end in July 2023, stating that the initiative had fulfilled its mission.[14]

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Pitching to Become a Regional Diplomatic Hub

In the last few years, Albania has elevated its profile diplomatically and has showcased an eagerness for a more involved role in international affairs.

In January 2021, Albania offered to host diplomatic talks between Greece and Türkiye over the lingering tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean.[15] Türkiye's then-foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, stated that he was open to considering Rama's invitation to meet with his Greek counterpart in Tirana. The fact that both Türkiye and Greece are treaty allies as members of NATO made the situation quite complex, and the two countries' representatives eventually met, but it was not in the Albanian capital. Nevertheless, the tentative invitation marked the first time Albania tried to facilitate talks between two powerful regional actors and help address the situation, which risked spiraling toward an international crisis.

In March 2022, Tirana hosted the EU-Western Balkans Summit, marking the first time that such a meeting was organized outside an EU member country. The summit focused on the ongoing initiatives to deepen the partnership between the European Union and the Balkan countries, particularly on the investments under the EU's Economic and Investment Plan, with an emphasis on green and digital transitions and energy security. The decision of EU leaders to accept Albania's bid to host the event represented a recognition of its growing credibility and an alternative form of rewarding its efforts, given the lack of progress on EU accession.

Albania also hosted the Ukraine-Western Balkans Summit in February 2024 in Tirana,[16] aimed at strengthening ties between Ukraine and the Balkan nations with a particular focus on unified responses to security threats posed by Russia. NATO's role was particularly evident in discussions about regional security and the threat of Russian aggression, which was expected considering that the alliance has been a key provider of military support and training to Kyiv. Another element that attracted much interest was the consideration about the positions and stability of non-member states like Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, given the potential for Russian influence to destabilize the region.

The summit offered a prime opportunity for Albania to showcase regional leadership. Rama emphasized Albania's unwavering support for Ukraine and highlighted the broader implications of the war in Ukraine and the risk of Russia-induced destabilization spreading to other parts of Europe. One of the summit's key outcomes was a reaffirmation by the Balkan leaders of their commitment to supporting Ukraine, potentially through joint initiatives, including discussions about joint arms and munitions production. In practice, critical challenges remain about the ability of the Balkan countries to be able to satisfy such requirements. Nevertheless, the gathering solidified Albania's role as an ally of Ukraine in the Balkans and demonstrated its ability to bring together regional players in the face of external threats.

Punching Above Its Diplomatic Weight

One of the most interesting developments for Albania in the last four years has been its increased visibility and boosted profile in international organizations.

In 2020, Albania served as the chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe for the first time in its history. This opportunity provided a platform for Albania's maturing diplomatic corps to prepare for another major undertaking.

At the meeting of the U.N. General Assembly on June 11, 2021, Albania was elected a nonpermanent member of the Security Council for the period 2022-2023. After a multiyear lobbying campaign and support from its American and European partners, Albania was selected as a consensual candidate of the Eastern European group. This was the first time since Albania had joined the United Nations in 1955 that it would hold a seat on the Security Council. Although the mandate began with some important priorities presented by the country's leadership and representatives – such as women, peace, and security; countering violent extremism; and climate and security – the outbreak of Russia's war in Ukraine disrupted its plans. While Albania continued to promote these priorities 2022-23, Russia's war in Ukraine dominated many of the Security Council's proceedings.

From the beginning of the conflict, Albania condemned Russia's invasion and expressed steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Albania fully aligned itself with NATO's response to the war and supported international sanctions against Moscow in line with the European Union's position. Importantly, as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council, Albania joined the United States in becoming a co-penholder on political issues in Ukraine and one of the most vocal supporters of accountability for war crimes committed during the conflict.

Equally important, Albania's election as a nonpermanent member of the U.N. Security Council for the 2022-2023 term

allowed it to elevate in a global setting some sensitive issues that affected the region. For instance, through its focus on women, peace, and security, Tirana was able to prioritize high-level discussions on conflict-related sexual violence.[17] This opportunity shed light about some of the atrocities committed during the Balkan wars in the 1990s, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo, and the associated long-term trauma.

Conclusion

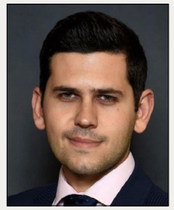
Like other countries in the region, Albania faces significant domestic challenges. Its institutions are fragile, and respect for the rule of law remains problematic. Despite efforts to diversify its economy and promote itself as a new tourism hub, its economy remains underdeveloped, with one of the lowest GDPs per capita in Europe. Corruption is still endemic, and the extensive judicial reform that began in 2016, with U.S. and EU support, has yet to show its full impact.

Additionally, the country faces an important demographic challenge, with more and more people, especially those in younger generations, moving to Western Europe and the United States for better employment, health care, education, and financial opportunities. However, while these challenges are common across the region, Albania operates in a generally good security environment and has been able to adopt a constructive and proactive foreign policy.

Albania's membership in NATO has significantly enhanced its role in the Western Balkans security architecture and has provided the necessary stability to pursue a relaxed foreign policy centered on international cooperation and dialogue. Through military modernization, active participation in NATO missions, regional cooperation, and strengthened diplomatic ties, Albania contributes to regional stability and security.

As mentioned above, Albania's military role in NATO has natural limits. Therefore, the growth in capabilities for the Albanian armed forces could be prioritized toward specialization in areas such as disaster response, humanitarian support, and other crisis management operations. Considering the challenges faced by Albania, Greece, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and other countries in the region, these capabilities would be beneficial to all.

Russia's war in Ukraine has heightened security risks for the broader region. Albania's attitude toward potential Russian spoilers in the region, such as Serbia's current political leadership, remains ambiguous. Nevertheless, this ambiguity offers the opportunity to continue serving as a bridge on multiple issues concerning the region, whether at the security level or on political and economic matters.



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Why the Issue of Minority Rights in Albania Could Become a Roadblock to EU Accession

Rudina Hajdari

Albania's approach to European Union conditionality on minority rights often mirrors that of a student barely making passing grades. While the country appears to align with EU requirements on the surface, deeper scrutiny reveals persistent violations. The 2023 national census resurfaced these issues, charting a significant population decline, primarily driven by emigration of the general population to Western countries. This broader demographic shift has indirectly exacerbated tensions with minority groups, which accuse the government of underrepresentation and inequitable treatment. Despite Albania's formal legislative alignment with EU standards, the country's trajectory in protecting national minorities reveals significant deficiencies in implementing minority protections and fair treatment.

These developments raise critical questions about the true state of minority rights in Albania and the efficacy of its legal frameworks. As Albania's general population continues to shrink, its lack of robust mechanisms to address minority grievances risks further undermining its social cohesion and its ability to meet EU accession criteria. In recent years, EU country reports have increasingly highlighted deficiencies in Albania's protection of national minorities, particularly flagging concerns related to its Greek minority. These issues have caused bilateral tensions with neighboring countries such as Greece and North Macedonia and have jeopardized Albania's EU accession path. As an EU member state, Greece could veto Albania's progress if concerns about the rights of its Greek minority are not adequately addressed.

Two pressing questions arise from this trend: How will Albania protect minority rights as it normalizes its relations with neighboring countries and upholds its obligations to meet EU standards? Will Albania take this matter seriously and not drag further than it has already done from the absence of secondary legislation, which has rendered the 2017 minority protection law effectively inoperative, coupled with census-related disputes that have sparked conflicts in the region? In terms of the 2023 census, Greece and North Macedonia underscore the limited political will to implement a robust minority protection program. These shortcomings could deepen Albania's diplomatic rifts with neighboring EU member states, harm its international credibility, and jeopardize its prospects for EU membership.

Albania's Legal Guarantees to Protect Minority Rights

Albania's approach to minority rights has been shaped by its historical and political legacies, including from the communist era. Despite being a small country of 2.4 million people (roughly the population of Kansas) that is often considered relatively homogeneous, issues concerning its national minorities have frequently been overlooked by successive governments. The international community has historically played a significant role in urging Albania to fulfill its obligations to protect national minorities. Its commitment to protect minorities began with its admission to the League of Nations on Dec. 17, 1920, after World War I.[1]

After World War II, Albania's communist regime continued its pledge to respect the rights of national minorities within its territory but implemented a policy of favoritism, particularly toward its Greek and Macedonian minorities. During this time, the Albanian state used two categories to give different statuses to distinct minority groups: National minorities were Greeks and Macedonians; and ethnolinguistic minorities were Roma Vlachs (Aromanians).[2] With the fall of communism and transitional changes, the government of Albania inherited the issue in its 1998 Constitution,[3] which provided a foundation for protecting national minorities but failed to address the rights and protections of ethnolinguistic minorities.

However, with the democratic transition, Albania became increasingly integrated into various international organizations, which brought a new dimension to its treatment of national minorities. This shift is reflected in its membership in organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe. The Albanian government also ratified two key European documents: the European Convention on Human Rights in 1996 and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM), in 2001.[4]

Finally, as part of its efforts to become fully integrated into Europe, Albania signed its Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union in 2006, elevating its commitment to protect minority rights. Under this agreement, the Albanian government acknowledged that the treatment of minorities would be essential not only for establishing good neighborly relations but also as a critical condition for its EU accession process, making it a key pillar of the country's EU path.[5]

The Issue of Dual Minority Categorization in Albania

Historically, Albania has recognized as national minorities those groups that share common characteristics – such as language, culture, traditions, and religious beliefs – with a "motherland" outside Albania. This classification primarily applied to Greeks and Macedonians. In contrast, other groups, such as the Roma and Aromanians, were acknowledged only as linguistic minorities, lacking the full recognition and rights given to national minorities. In addition, the preferential status granted to Greeks and Macedonians as national minorities was largely due to their geographic concentration and their ability to advocate effectively for their rights. In contrast, ethnolinguistic minorities, which were often more nomadic, lacked the resources and access needed to influence the government, leaving them with far less protection.

The "minority zones" refer to compact communities where minorities live together to preserve their traditions and cultures. For example, the Greek minority, which is concentrated in Southern Albania near its border with Greece, predominantly resides in the districts of Saranda, Delvina, and Gjirokastra. In contrast, the Roma and Vlach minorities are dispersed across rural areas such as the Muzeqe region of Fier, Frashër in Përmet, and Mokrra in Pogradec.[6] Despite the absence of schools offering instruction in their respective languages, these communities – particularly the Vlachs – have managed to preserve their cultures and traditions. However, the Roma minority and Egyptian minority are considered the most discriminated against in Albania. These groups – which are scattered across Central and Southern Albania, with many concentrated on the outskirts of Tirana – face significant challenges, including minimal access to education, inadequate government support for housing, and limited access to food, health care, and other essential services.[7]

In other words, national minorities, such as Greeks and Slavic Macedonians, were granted limited educational rights in their native languages even during the communist era, but only within designated minority zones, where they formed the majority. This selective recognition of rights

perpetuated systemic discrimination, which carried over into the postcommunist era, leaving a legacy that continues to hinder Albania's ability to effectively address minority rights.

This unequal classification of minorities has drawn criticism from the international community from the outset. For instance, in its first opinion on the FCNM in 2001, the Advisory Committee of the Council of Europe emphasized in Article 20 that the Albanian government should treat both national and linguistic minorities equally.[8] The committee noted that many members of linguistic minorities feel their heritage and culture extend far beyond mere linguistic distinctions. All members of minorities, regardless of where they live in Albania, should have the right to use their minority language and be informed in that language. This right should be guaranteed equally to both national minorities and linguistic minorities, whose mother tongues have been passed down from generation to generation and should be preserved.

Roma, Egyptians, and Aromanians were among the groups in Albania that were most discriminated against. They face significant barriers to accessing education, housing, and health care. Additionally, many children from these minorities have been subjected to human trafficking and have dropped out of school.[9] In its Communication on EU Enlargement Policy, the European Commission's 2016 Country Report on Albania emphasized the need for equal rights for all minorities. The report called for comprehensive policies to address disparities, noting that Roma and Egyptians faced significant discrimination in education, employment, housing, health care, and civil registration.[10] The lack of constitutional recognition for ethnolinguistic minorities further marginalized their rights and cultural identities.

As a result, one of the key areas identified by the European Commission was the need to adopt a comprehensive law on the protection of national minorities. This was seen as a crucial step to address disparities among minority groups and strengthen Albania's framework for minority protection.[11] The lack of comprehensive legislation on this issue was also in the First Opinion (2001), Second Opinion (2008), and Third Opinion (2012) of the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.[12] After more than a decade, the Albanian government finally acknowledged the need to strengthen its legal framework and to prioritize minority rights to maintain good relations with Western allies and advance its EU accession process.

The Janus Effect of the 2017 Law on the Protection of National Minorities

The 2017 Law on the Protection of National Minorities represents a landmark piece of legislation that defines the status and rights of national minorities in the Republic of Albania.[13] Before its adoption, Albania lacked a specific legal framework for minority protection, resulting in legal inconsistencies and gaps in addressing minority rights. This law marked a significant shift by providing equal recognition and protection for all minority groups, eliminating previous classifications that created disparities, and including newly recognized minority groups.

The legislation aimed to align the Albanian Constitution with existing but scattered legislative norms, creating a unified and coherent framework for the protection of minority rights. Under the 2017 law, nine national minorities were officially recognized: Greeks, Macedonians, Aromanians, Roma, Egyptians, Serbs, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and Bulgarians.[14]

Article 4 of the law establishes an open-list system, allowing for the possibility of adding other minority groups that are "formally recognized." However, the term "formally recognized" implies that groups seeking recognition as minorities must submit a formal request, which must then be approved by the authorities.[15] Despite this limitation, the provision leaves room for future amendments that would include additional minority groups if necessary.

A key aspect of the law is the introduction of the principle of self-identification (Article 6), which allows individuals to declare their identity as part of a national minority, giving them the freedom to decide whether they wish to be treated as such.[16] This approach ensures that identity is not limited to civil registration records, offering a more inclusive and democratic process. Applied for the first time during the 2023 census, this provision represents a significant step forward. In the 2011 census, self-identification was prohibited, and answers to questions about identity were required to align with civil registration records.[17] However, even this method proved to be problematic in terms of accurately reflecting minority numbers.

Another important component of this law is Article 15, which addresses the use of minority languages in communication with public authorities.[18] It allows national minorities to use their mother tongue, but only in local government units where they make up at least 20% of the population.[19] This threshold creates significant challenges, as it often excludes minority groups from accessing their rights when their numbers fall below this percentage.

The 20% rule also puts at risk two key minority rights: the right to education and the right to use minority languages, which are restricted to certain areas. This is particularly problematic because the calculation is based on the population of each of Albania's 61 municipalities. Recent territorial reforms have divided some minority populations across multiple municipalities, making it even harder for them to meet the required percentage. As a result, many members of national minorities living in these larger and mixed municipalities cannot access their language or educational rights.[20]

The 2012 administration reform in Albania created larger municipalities where it is nearly impossible for minority populations to meet the 20% threshold. While the 2017 law aimed to address some of these issues, it only partially solved the problem. On one hand, it recognizes the right of all minorities to use their languages; on the other hand, it restricts this right to specific areas. Furthermore, the law relies on existing legislation or administrative decisions for its implementation, leaving much of the responsibility to local authorities.

As a result, language rights are currently recognized only in three municipalities where the 20% threshold is met: Dropull and Finiq, home to the Greek minority; and Pustec, home to the Macedonian minority.[21] Minorities living outside their traditional areas, such as in urban centers or the capital city, are left without access to language rights. Under the current system, the Albanian government struggles to ensure that minority rights are upheld in areas where minorities are more dispersed.

Albania's approach to minority language use reflects a reluctance to expand protections, driven by concerns about maintaining national cohesion. Debates over language policy have often been controversial and lack a consensus, which, combined with limited political will, has led to mistrust among minority groups.[22] Without meaningful reforms, these challenges are likely to persist, further limiting the rights of minorities in Albania.

While Albanian legislation recognizes the right of all national minorities to learn their mother tongue through schools and classes that teach minority languages, history, and culture, the reality on the ground remains challenging. Albanian authorities are still unable to provide minority language education to all nine officially recognized minorities, particularly those with smaller populations.

Albania falls behind other Western Balkan countries in protecting linguistic rights. It is the only country in the region that is a member of the Council of Europe, but it has not signed or ratified the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages – a key step to meeting European standards.[23] This reluctance is closely tied to the challenges in implementing minority language rights in practice, exposing a significant gap between policy commitments and actual outcomes. Without meaningful progress in this area, Albania risks further delaying its efforts to meet its obligations to protect and promote minority rights.

Finally, Albania must adopt the secondary legislation necessary to implement the comprehensive law on protecting minorities. This includes establishing effective mechanisms and revising existing laws to ensure that the principles and rights outlined in the framework law are put into practice.[24] The delay in adopting this secondary legislation reflects the slow progress Albania is making toward building a comprehensive system for minority protection. This has been a significant concern for the European Commission, which has called on Albania to "swiftly adopt the full package of related secondary legislation."[25]

The 2023 Census' Role in Protecting National Minorities

The 2023 Albanian census, launched on Sept. 18, marked the first time Albania adopted the principle of self-identification, as mandated by the 2017 Law on the Protection of National Minorities. This allowed individuals to freely choose their identity, regardless of birth certificate records. This marked a significant departure from previous censuses, including the controversial 2011 census, which imposed fines of €700 ($730) on minorities for providing "incorrect" responses that conflicted with civil registry records.[26] In other words, the Advisory Committee of the FCNM urged the Albanian government to end this practice.

During 2023, both the European Commission and the Advisory Committee of the FCNM, in their Fifth Opinion, called on Albanian authorities to take concrete and sustained measures to build trust in the census process. These efforts include raising awareness about the importance of the census, ensuring the right to free self-identification (including multiple affiliations), and educating the public on the provisions of the new census law.[27] The Advisory Committee also emphasized the need to recruit and train census interviewers from national minorities and ensure that all interviewers are adequately trained to assist illiterate persons. Furthermore, it recommended involving national minorities in evaluating the census process to foster transparency and credibility.[28]

The European Commission, while expressing disappointment with Albania's slow implementation of the 2017 Law on Minorities, also emphasized the importance of conducting the September 2023 census "in a smooth and transparent manner, aligned with international standards."[29] To support this process, the EU provided €4.8 million in

funding to the Institute of Statistics.[30] However, despite numerous warnings and clear efforts by the international community, the 2023 census was not without controversy, underscoring ongoing challenges in accurately representing and protecting national minorities. These issues have exacerbated regional tensions to spiral and could hinder Albania's path to EU integration.

First, members of Albania's Macedonian minority claim that their numbers have nearly halved, alleging that members of their community were pressured by Bulgaria to identify as Bulgarian, reportedly incentivized by promises of EU passports, particularly in eastern regions bordering Kosovo and North Macedonia.[31] The ongoing issue between North Macedonia and Bulgaria stems from long-standing disputes over identity, language, and history. These disagreements have delayed North Macedonia's EU integration and could also create obstacles for Albania if it does not address Bulgaria's demands.

Since Bulgaria is an EU member state with the power to block Albania's EU accession, its influence has been significant. Allegedly, then-Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov pressured Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama to include Bulgarians as a recognized minority in the 2017 Law on Minorities. As a result, the Bulgarian minority was added to the list of recognized groups at the last minute after negotiations between the two leaders.[32] Amid the ongoing conflict between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, Albania has "decoupled" from North Macedonia – a term used to indicate that Albania has continued to progress on its EU path independently of its neighbor.

Indeed, the 2023 census recorded over 7,000 individuals identifying as Bulgarian, a group virtually nonexistent and unrecognized in the 2011 census. Meanwhile, the Macedonian minority experienced a significant decline, dropping from 5,300 in the 2011 census to just 2,300 in 2023. Macedonian representatives claim that promises of EU passports swayed individuals from their community, effectively creating a new Bulgarian minority in regions traditionally inhabited by Macedonians, such as Prespa, Golloborda, and Gora.[33]

Second, the Greek minority, like the Macedonian minority – two of Albania's main historical national minorities – also claimed significant underrepresentation in the 2023 census, asserting that their actual numbers are much higher than reported. According to the census, the Greek minority accounts for only 1% of Albania's population, totaling 23,485 individuals (these are 2023 data from Instat). The Greek government, including the Foreign Ministry, reacted strongly to these results, accusing the Albanian government of deliberately underreporting the Greek minority to diminish its influence at both local and national levels. The foreign minister claimed that "the initial results demonstrate serious issues related to the registration process, which cast doubt on the results themselves. Members of the Greek ethnic minority have already exposed these issues. There are concerns regarding the manner in which this registration was conducted."[34]

Tensions surrounding the Greek minority escalated even more after the Albanian government's actions against Fredi Bejleri, the ethnic Greek mayor-elect of Himara, a small town in the south of Albania, who was jailed on vote-buying charges. These events strained relations with Greece and increased scrutiny of Albania's treatment of minorities. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis emphasized that Albania's handling of its Greek minority is directly tied to its EU accession prospects.[35] In other words, Greek officials reminded Albania that its EU path depends on Greece's approval, warning that concerns over the treatment of the Greek minority in Albania could become a serious obstacle.

Third and finally, counts for Roma and Egyptian communities increased significantly in the 2023 census, in which 9,813 individuals identified as Roma and 12,375 as Egyptian. In contrast, the 2011 census recorded much lower numbers; only the Roma were officially recognized as a linguistic minority.[36] Given that these minorities face severe socio-economic challenges – including limited access to education, housing, and health care – the census could serve as a turning point in allocating more budgetary funds to education, housing, and social welfare than in 2011.[37]

Conclusion

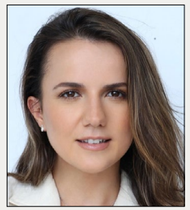
Albania's treatment of national minorities has a complex history, rooted in the communist regime's efforts to portray a more homogeneous nation. During that era, only Greeks and Macedonians were officially recognized as national minorities, while other groups, such as the Roma and Vlachs, were largely ignored and were considered only as linguistic minorities. This approach demonstrated a clear lack of commitment to protecting and respecting the rights of minority groups.

As Albania transitioned to democracy in the early 1990s and began to be integrated into international organizations like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the Council of Europe, it became obligated to uphold and respect the rights of minorities within its borders. Although it took decades for Albania to recognize all minority groups under the 2017 Law on the Protection of National Minorities, this milestone strengthened its legal framework and reflected a greater commitment to it, particularly as the country sought EU membership.

However, even since 2017, significant challenges have remained. One major issue is the 20% threshold for minority language use in schools, which prevents smaller groups – such as the Roma, Egyptians, and Aromanians – from accessing education in their native languages or using their languages in public institutions.

The 2023 census served as a true litmus test for Albania's implementation of the 2017 law, particularly its provision on self-identification. This provision allows individuals to self-identify their ethnic origin freely, regardless of birth certificates or civil registry records. Despite these advancements, the census was widely contested, especially by members of the Greek and Macedonian minorities, who claimed underrepresentation.

These disputes have not only reignited tensions between Albania and its neighbors but have also jeopardized its path to EU integration. While Albania has made progress in addressing minority rights, the controversies surrounding the 2023 census highlight the need for further efforts to ensure transparency and fairness. How Albania's treatment of national minorities will make an impact on its EU aspirations and its relations with neighboring countries remains to be seen and will require careful attention in the future.



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Gent Shkullaku / AFP via Getty Images

Albanian women demonstrate in Tirana during International Women's Day in March 2019.

Women's Rights in Albania: A Growing Phenomenon and the Last Taboos

Alice Taylor

Albania is a patriarchal country that continues to face numerous challenges regarding women's rights. Albanian society faces several issues today: one of the highest rates of domestic violence in Europe,[1] forced and arranged marriages,[2] restrictions on women from working or leaving the house alone,[3] heavily enforced gender stereotypes, and violence perpetrated against women and girls online, in the media, and in public. Since 2011, at least 159 Albanian women have been murdered by a former intimate partner or family member.[4]

Albania's legal framework provides women and girls with equal rights to men: the rights to own and inherit, to be protected, to earn a fair salary, to access reproductive health care, and to use legal recourse to right the wrongs against them. But in reality, implementation is lacking. Women and girls are often not aware of their rights, and when they try to seek justice, they fail for several reasons. These include corruption,[5] a long backlog of cases, societal taboos and stigmas against victims, economic complexities, and a lack of resources at every level.

Furthermore, women continue to be paid less than men, while working longer hours and undertaking more unpaid care work and domestic labor.[6] While the country excels in women's participation in local and national government,[7] this does not reflect women's empowerment in daily life.

This essay focuses on matters that are not well known or reported or that represent long-standing societal taboos.

During my research for this essay, I encountered many people who believed that some of these issues, such as gender-selective abortion and "virginity surgery," no longer existed, but the truth is, that they do.

Virginity Surgery/Hymenoplasty

Hymenoplasty, or hymen reconstruction, is a surgical procedure performed on women to reconstruct the hymen. In the context of this essay, the reason for performing hymenoplasty on women in Albania is through a wish to "restore" their virginity before marriage.

The presence of the hymen, a thin membrane partially covering the vaginal opening in some women, has long been considered "evidence" of virginity. For centuries and in many different cultures, before marriage, a woman would be inspected by doctors, and after her wedding night, the bed sheets would be checked for blood representing the breaking of the hymen. This thinking is flawed because a woman can be a virgin and not have an intact hymen. This occurs naturally in some women, but it can also be broken from sports and using tampons or menstrual cups.

In Albania, "repairing" the hymen before marriage is typically carried out on women 18-30 years old in private clinics and public hospitals. While it is not allowed in public hospitals, it is performed for a fee, according to multiple sources from the health care sector. The procedure can cost between 200 and 2,000 euros, depending on the doctor, clinic, and extent of the procedure.

While the practice died out somewhat during the 1990s, numbers are rising again. Exact figures are hard to find, due to the procedure's clandestine nature, but several sources from those working in women's health estimate that between three and five are carried out in Tirana every day.

A Google search for private clinics brings up several practices that all appear to offer the service. Some that offer "labiaplasty" and similar interventions are also known to work on hymen reconstruction.

One former nurse at University Hospital Center Mother Teresa, the country's main hospital, said the procedure was regularly carried out on the premises for a fee. They said it was usually women in their mid-20s who were due to get married to Albanian men, usually older and living in the diaspora, who wanted to marry a "virgin.'" Some were virgins but did not have an intact hymen, while others were not virgins but wanted to conceal the "shame" from their family and future spouse.

One doctor told Osserbatorio Balcani e Caucaso Trans Europa, "Until the [19]50s, in this country, a woman had to hang out her blood-stained sheets after the first wedding night, to prove her virginity to her husband, relatives and neighbors. It is exactly the same phenomenon. Some women even come to the clinic accompanied by their partners, who want to verify their young wives' virginity when they do not bleed during their first sexual act. This happens in 38% of cases."[8]

Even today in Albania, losing your virginity to anyone except your husband is considered taboo, a mentality traced back to the Kanun, a set of feudal rules prominent in the north of the country but with reach throughout the rest of Albania. Under the Kanun,[9] if a bride was found not to be a virgin, she could be returned to her family and confined to the house for the rest of her life or be remarried to a husband of a lower status.

For reasons of preserving a woman's "purity," it was expected that girls would be taken out of school when they hit puberty and would not be allowed out after dark, or at all, unaccompanied. In some regions, women are still an uncommon sight in coffee shops, and friendship groups do not mix sexes. Everything in a woman's life hinges on honor, and the "shameful" actions of a woman, including fraternizing with the opposite sex, staying out late, and loss of virginity, would bring shame upon the entire family,[10] even leading to the rejection of the woman from the family unit. So severe is this mindset that even women who have been sexually abused or sex trafficked,[11] thus losing their virginity against their will, are rejected by their families when returning home.

For some who are set to get married, while previously they would try to hide their lack of a hymen by calculating their menstrual days or even trying to "fake" a hymen, now they resort to surgery. "I wanted to be a virgin when I was married, but at university, I had a boyfriend. He left Albania, and we did not get married. Now I will marry, and it is expected I am 'untouched.' If my parents knew, I would bring a big shame on their family. For this reason, I will do the procedure," said one young woman from Diber living in Tirana.

"I was a virgin when I got married at 22, but the doctor told me I did not look like a virgin, and he offered to fix it," said B.V., from Lezhë. "I paid 400 euros, all the savings I had, but my husband was sure of my honor."

Gender-Selective Abortion

In Albania, gender-selective abortion remains a widespread practice, with data from the UNFPA estimating that over the last 10 years, some 21,000 Albanian girls were aborted

just because they were female.[12] Other data from the United Nations found that around 25% of Albanian families who already have one female child in the family would choose to abort the second child if it was female.[13] In addition, it is relatively common that women are pressured into producing a male child first or even threatened with divorce if they cannot produce a male heir as the first child or at all.

This preference for males is found in many patriarchal societies worldwide and in the Balkans. In Albania, it is also partly rooted in the Kanun. Men have the leading role in Albanian society and the family unit. Because family blood relations are defined solely by the male members, the birth of sons was required to continue the survival of the family name and identity. The inheritance of the family line is still important for Albanians, and it is often said among older individuals that without a son, the family line and all its historical efforts and achievements are gone.

In some areas, if no son is produced, the family property will be passed to the next male nephew rather than a woman, even if she is a more direct descendant. They are also assigned the role of "protector" and "provider" of the family, whereas a girl is someone to be married off to another family to take care of the home and produce more male heirs.

Upon telling someone they are pregnant with a girl, women are often told, "*edhe nje cun*" ("and one boy"), wishing them "better luck" next time they conceive.

So strong is this desire for male children that female children would sometimes be given forenames, which would either express the parents' displeasure at their sex or act as a sort of "wish" for any future children.

For example, there are the forenames Fundime/Mbarime (ending), Mjaftime (stop/no more), Hume (lost), Sose (ending), Gabime (bad), Bete (false promise), and Pseerdhe (why did you come). Many of these names have now been banned under Albanian law,[14] but women today still bear these names.

The result of these cultural complexities is that Albania has ranked fourth globally regarding the disparity between the number of girls and boys born. In 2020, the U.N. found that 111 boys were born for every 100 girls.[15] However, in the last few years, the situation has shown signs of improving, falling from 105 to 100 in 2024. The ratio considered normal by the World Health Organization is 103-105.[16] While the situation is displaying a downward trend, many Albanian women, either through choice or under pressure from their husbands and family, are still choosing to abort female fetuses.

Under Albanian law,[17] abortion is legal until 12 weeks, and aborting a fetus due to its sex is illegal. Ultrasound scans, which provide the parents with information on the sex of the fetus, are typically carried out at about 12 weeks, which leaves a very small window of time between finding out the sex and carrying out the abortion. It also means it is likely that not only is the law being broken by allowing abortions to take place because of sex but also that they are being carried out after the 12-week cut-off point.

> *"I work in the public hospital and several private clinics. I have around 2-3 abortions a week. I do not ask why they are having the abortion, but sometimes they tell me it is because 'we want a boy.' I do not stop them, I do not judge. I am a doctor."*
>
> — An OB-GYN in Tirana

However, a blood test, which can provide information on the sex of the fetus before 12 weeks, has become popular, as it not only allows the termination to take place earlier but also makes it harder to prove the termination has been requested based on sex. Known as an NIPT, the test screens for conditions such as Down Syndrome but can also tell parents the sex of the fetus at about 10 weeks. While the test is expensive, costing around 500 euros (50,000 lek) in private clinics in Tirana, it means some women take the test in a private clinic, get the results, and then go to the state hospital for the termination. Thus, the medical practitioner in the state hospital would not necessarily be aware that the parents knew the sex of the fetus when requesting a termination.

> *"I paid around 45,000 new lek for the test when I was nine weeks pregnant. When I discovered I was having a girl, my mother-in-law hinted it was 'not too late' to do something about it. I declined, and we never spoke of it again."*
>
> — S.S. in Tirana

> *"I had an abortion in 2021 when we found out it was a girl. I have two girls already, and my husband and his father want a boy. We got the abortion at the same private doctor who did the test. I have not yet got pregnant again, although there is nothing wrong with me."*
>
> — V.B., from Durres

While some gynecologists will terminate pregnancies due to the sex of the child, one working at a public hospital in Tirana told me that when they suspect a situation where the mother is being pressured to produce a son, they will not reveal the sex of the baby.

> *"There have been times I have said it is impossible to determine, and one time I even said it was a boy when it was not. I can see sometimes the woman is anxious, and I have seen husbands be angry at the news and leave their wives in the hospital. Sometimes it is best not to say."*
>
> — Gynecologist

They also said abortions are being done over the 12-week legal deadline in private clinics throughout Tirana.

Recent data has shown that the girl/boy ratio is stabilizing. This is also due to a general decline in the number of children born in the country. According to INSTAT,[18] in 2023, 27,281 babies were born, the lowest number since records began in 1934.

According to the same INSTAT data, the current birth rate in Albania is 1.21 children per woman, a decline from 1.71 in 2012. This decline is due to factors such as emigration, economic difficulties, and the emancipation of Albanian women, who choose to continue their education and careers instead of marrying and becoming mothers at a young age.

Domestic Violence and Access to Support

Exact numbers on how many Albanian women and girls experience domestic violence are hard to find, but sporadic data from various sources, when pieced together, create an alarming picture.

A UNDP report from 2019 found that 52.9% of Albanian women had experienced at least one form of violence (stalking, sexual harassment, non-partner violence, dating violence, intimate partner violence) in their lifetime.[19] Of these, 36.6% of women had experienced violence at least once in the 12 months before taking the survey – some 33.37% experienced intimate partner violence in the same time frame, and 61.8% experienced dating violence.

More recent figures from the High State Audit Office that were reported by Euronews Albania show that in 2023,[20] there were over 5,000 instances of domestic violence reported to the police, 74% of which were committed by men. In the same year, 12 women were murdered by their family members or former intimate partners. However, the number of police reports filed or the percentage that gave answers in a survey is not an accurate way to assess the situation because many women never report the violence.

One of the biggest issues facing female victims of domestic violence in Albania is the lack of access to support services, particularly financial assistance and housing. According to data collected from 47 of Albania's 67 municipalities, provided to the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network through freedom of information requests,[21] just 12 have shelters that can provide immediate housing for women and their children.

Survivors of domestic violence are also entitled to rent subsidies to help them get established once they leave a violent situation, but the system falls short of providing what is needed. In Tirana, over the last three years, some 3,388 cases of domestic violence were reported, but just 25 received subsidies.[22] While women may not need subsidies in some cases, as they may have other options, this number still seems low.

In simple terms, many women do not leave the marital home, or they return after leaving, because they cannot afford to live alone. The minimum wage in Albania is 40,000 lek, and the average price of a one-bedroom apartment in Tirana is now around 50,000 lek in the city center, falling to 35,000-40,000 in the suburbs.

> *"I make 44,000 lek a month and have two children. This is not enough to pay for the things they need for school, clothes, food, and our lights. I asked for help paying rent, but it was not enough – they said I couldn't have more. I had to go back."*
>
> — A.D., in Tirana

Furthermore, due to social stigmas, domestic violence victims struggle to get employed or find rental accommodation because the owner or employer does not want to be seen as getting involved.

> *When my job found out what happened, I was asked to leave. They did not want to risk conflict with my husband, and they were worried if it was in the media, the customers would look badly at me. I have no choice but to return to him now because the government gives nothing.*
>
> — L.L., in Tirana

In cases where the woman does leave the home and files a police report, these can often be withdrawn when she realizes she is unable to support herself or her children on her own. This phenomenon sees them issue statements of "normalization of relations" with the abuser and resuming the cohabitation.

> *I went to the notary and signed a paper that I forgive him, and it was a misunderstanding, and our link will continue in a good way. This is easier than being alone, and he told me he would change.*
>
> — E.M., in Tirana

Police officers also lack special training, particularly in recognizing risk and following up on victims' reports of problems. This means that many cases go unreported, and those that are reported are at risk of not being taken seriously.

Online Harassment

As of January 2024, 62.9% of Albania's population used at least one social media platform each month,[23] with 47.3% of users being female. While women are using social media platforms less than men, they are experiencing digital violence and online harassment at a higher rate.

According to a report from U.N. Women,[24] 41% of female Albanian social media users have experienced at least one form of digital violence, with the data showing that Instagram was the platform where the majority of the abuse takes place.

What is particularly interesting in the Albanian situation is that while across the region, 32.1% of cases are perpetrated by those close to the woman or girl, in Albania, the number is significantly higher, at over 50%, specifically a family member or boss. It is possible to draw a parallel between the incidents of online and offline violence, as Albania has the highest rate of domestic and intimate partner violence in the region.

Female activists are more likely to experience harassment. According to a report by the Institute of Democracy and Mediation, 83% of women activists have experienced smear campaigns; threats of assault, rape, or murder; and other forms of harassment.

For the year 2023, iSigurt, a platform set up to allow users to report instances of digital violence, found that cybercrime reports were up 160% from 2022, with 244 reports. Of those, 62% of the reports were from women and girls between 11 and 30 years old. The majority of the incidents happened on TikTok and Instagram, with bullying constituting 37%, hate speech 21%, blackmail 15%, and threats of violence or sexual violence 15%.

Data from the Interior Ministry showed that in 2023, 765 cybercrime cases were identified, a 40.4% increase from 2022.

As cases of online harassment, bullying, revenge porn, and blackmail increased, in early 2024, the situation took a macabre turn as Albania counted two suicides potentially linked to the platform.

In January, a mother of four, Bedrie Loka,[25] died by suicide after a TikTok account was opened in her name and several sensitive images were posted, including denigrating and humiliating comments. While it has yet to be confirmed that this was the exact trigger for her suicide, it was reported she had notified the police of the account but that no action was taken.

Around one month later, another woman, Sibela Abedini,[26] died by suicide after an intimate photo of her was posted on TikTok, reportedly linked to an ongoing conflict with her former partner.

Following the two incidents and a heated public debate, Prime Minister Edi Rama met with TikTok deputy director general Theo Bertram at the Munich Security Council to discuss recent events and the need to combat violence, extortion, and hate speech online.[27]

"We discussed with full understanding the recent events in Albania and the need to increase vigilance against violence, blackmail, and hate speech online, as well as we got to know the measures being taken by the company to increase the level of moderation of messages in the Albanian language," Rama said.

Around the same time, then-Interior Minister Taulant Balla met with Jakub Olek, the director of public policy and government relations for Central and Eastern Europe for TikTok and said, "I expressed our concerns over the recent events and the need to increase vigilance against violence, disinformation, blackmail and the language of online hate."

When asked to comment,[28] TikTok said, "The safety of our European community of 150 million users is a top priority for TikTok, and we have 6,000 moderators focused on content for Europe, part of a global team of 40,000 people fighting harmful content."

Technology poses other risks to women online. In October 2023, a video started circulating on social media, apparently showing the singer and model Luana Vjollca in a sexually explicit position. The star denied it was her in the video, but the public did not believe her, and the video continued to be shared.

Only when technology experts closely analyzed the video was it determined it was a deepfake produced with artificial intelligence.[29] The software can use an individual's face and apply it to various situations to create new footage depicting actions or events that never actually happened.

But Luana is not artificial intelligence's only victim; in Kosovo, authorities arrested seven individuals for disseminating deepfake images, videos, and other forms of derogatory content in a Telegram group called Albkings,[30] which has more than 100,000 members.

Conclusion

While Albania is, on paper, protecting women's rights and granting full equality in every sphere of life to women and girls, challenges remain. These challenges are not just limited to "obvious" issues such as domestic violence and patriarchal stereotypes; they show their face in other ways. Many policymakers do not consider the pressure women face to meet certain expectations, and the drastic measures they may feel forced to take to "fit in" with what Albanian society is expecting of them. There is a real need for proper enforcement and crackdowns on illegal and unethical practices in the medical sector, as well as more attention on the regulation of AI and social media. Until those in a position of power get ahead of the curve and face some uncomfortable truths, the Albanian woman's place in society will remain precarious.



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Adnan Beci / AFP via Getty Images

Albanian LGBTQ+ activists wave flags during the Tirana Gay Pride event in May 2023, in Tirana.

The Multifaceted Struggle of the LGBTQ+ Community in Albania

Gresa Hasa

On May 17, 2024, during the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia in Albania's capital Tirana, Alba Ahmetaj and Edlira Maraj, after 15 years together, celebrated their love with a symbolic wedding ceremony on the rooftop of the Municipality of Tirana, surrounded by their two daughters and close friends.[1] It was the first publicly celebrated LGBTQ+ wedding in Albania.[2] Despite same-sex marriages not being legally recognized in the country, Ahmetaj and Maraj leveraged the interpretation of Article 53(1) of the Albanian Constitution, in which it is stated that "Everyone has the right to marry" without specifying the gender or sexual orientation of those wishing to marry.[3]

The ceremony attracted significant attention, particularly from the country's main religious institutions, which reacted negatively to both the event and the right to same-sex marriage in Albania.[4, 5, 6] Widespread homophobic reactions came from political figures, as well as the broader public, with conservative groups protesting against same-sex unions and LGBTQ+ individuals' right to become parents.[7, 8]

As the first openly homosexual couple and family in Albania, Ahmetaj and Maraj were already prepared for the homophobic and violent reception that could follow their decision to organize a public wedding ceremony at a state institution. The venue – one of the functions of which is to officially grant citizens the right to marry – was purposefully chosen for their ceremony, aiming to demonstrate that homosexual love belongs in the public space in Albania, not in the closet, and that it is not something shameful, sinful, or an anomaly, as many conservatives or religious fanatics in the Albanian society and beyond tend to think. Above all, they wanted to show that LGBTQ+ rights are not a private issue but a matter of institutional responsibility and that the state is obligated to uphold and respect these rights equally.

"The personal is political," a cornerstone of the second wave feminist movements in the West during the 1960s and 1970s, is echoed in the current feminist developments in Albania and the LGBTQ+ community, as they navigate daily struggles for recognition and equal rights in a country still grappling with its unresolved past.

Albania, which did not experience a sexual or feminist revolution due to the 45-year socialist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha following WWII, and where homosexuality remained criminalized until 1995, is only recently beginning to observe signs of feminist resistance and discourse, particularly emerging from the grassroots level.[9, 10] This contrasts with the NGO-style activism that arose after the fall of the dictatorship in the 1990s, which primarily focused on human rights rather than a feminist approach, being limited to issues such as domestic violence and addressing the risks faced mainly by cis, white, Albanian women during the transition period. It neglected Roma and Egyptian women and migrant, disabled, and LGBTQ+ individuals and failed to encompass a broader range of issues beyond domestic violence or human trafficking.

Nowadays, progressive and intersectional discourse and practice are evident, though they remain largely confined to Tirana. Despite efforts to extend these practices to the country's periphery, where issues are more severe and being openly LGBTQ+ frequently poses a significant risk to one's life and wellbeing, progress is steady but slow.

As of July 12, 2024, the latest assessment by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner highlights that, despite some institutional efforts, the situation for LGBTQ+ individuals in Albania remains dire.[11] Either nondiscrimination laws are not applied or there is insufficient data to address discrimination, whether in cases of hate crimes, workplace discrimination, or other forms of violence. Civil society organizations advocating for LGBTQ+ rights said this is particularly concerning for transgender women, who face the most precarious conditions.[12]

Albania adopted the Law on Protection Against Discrimination in 2010 and introduced several amendments to the Criminal Code to strengthen protection for LGBTQ+ individuals.[13] However, as demonstrated in the cases of Ahmetaj and Maraj, the law still does not recognize same-sex partnerships and marriages, LGBTQ+ parenthood, or gender affirmation and transition for transgender individuals. For instance, Ahmetaj and Maraj remain in an ongoing legal battle with state institutions in Albania also concerning the equal recognition of parenthood rights over their two daughters.[14] This poses significant risks for the wellbeing of the entire family, particularly the children, because in practice, the absence of a male legal custodian for their daughters, as required by Albanian regulation, impacts their access to public services, including health care, education, the right to obtain ID cards, and other administrative and social matters.[15] A civil partnership law, which would offer LGBTQ+ couples like Ahmetaj and Maraj legal rights akin to those of married spouses – such as consenting to medical treatment on behalf of a partner and inheritance rights – would significantly ease their daily lives, particularly for those also aspiring to parenthood, and guarantee the wellbeing of all families equally. Despite this, the Albanian state has consistently refused to address this need.

On the other hand, even if the government were to address administrative homophobia, significant work would remain to combat public perceptions and a patriarchal culture of violence affecting the safety, equality, and prosperity of LGBTQ+ individuals. Even if the Albanian state legalized same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ parenthood, and gender affirmation, LGBTQ+ individuals in Albania would still face difficulties living peacefully and safely, with many still struggling to make ends meet amid fears of homophobic and hate-driven attacks.

Considering these factors, this article will offer an intersectional and in-depth analysis of the multilayered obstacles faced by the LGBTQ+ community in Albania. It will examine issues such as institutional apathy, noncompliance with nondiscrimination laws and EU standards, and challenges related to health care services, including mental health, housing, education, access to goods and services, and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The analysis will focus on how the community's intersecting identities influence these challenges and explore how LGBTQ+ individuals and advocacy groups navigate the legal, political, and social barriers in Albania's semi-authoritarian and patriarchal regime in their struggle for recognition, acceptance, and equality.

The article will conclude by outlining the importance of external financial and political support toward LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in Albania, as well as the significance of the Albanian government and other state institutions' cooperation and adherence to international human rights conventions, the rule of law, and EU membership that Albania is currently negotiating, with a focus on LGBTQ+ rights.[16]

Intersecting Identities, Increased Risks

According to the most recent annual review of the European non-governmental International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA-Europe), in European countries like Albania, civil society groups "often step in to fill the absence of public services to support LGBTI people with basic needs."[17] This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when organizations such as Aleanca LGBT+ and shelters like "Streha" (Albanian for "Shelter") in Tirana played a significant role in providing members of the community – especially those in vulnerable situations – with food and medicine and connecting them to public institutions like hospitals and other health care facilities when needed.

However, even in non-pandemic times, LGBTQ+ advocacy groups operate under extraordinary conditions, often shouldering responsibilities that are typically the role of state institutions, with Aleanca LGBT+ in Albania standing as the primary provider of various services and compensating for numerous gaps left by state institutions. The organization works to provide services, ensure safety, and guarantee equitable access to goods and services for community members, while state institutions remain apathetic and largely disengaged from the community's needs. Organizations like Aleanca LGBT+ often undertake this work despite facing significant financial and human resource limitations. Moreover, the scale of the problems and needs in a country like Albania is immense, while civil society organizations' capacities and structures remain deeply vulnerable.

According to ILGA-Europe's 2024 country report, in Albania, this situation has been particularly evident in the cases of "transgender sex workers and people living with HIV."[18] Sex work remains illegal and criminalized in Albania, which particularly impacts transgender sex workers: Due to the criminalization, they are unable to report crimes and offenses encountered during their work without risking legal consequences.

If a transgender or HIV-positive individual also belongs to the Roma or Egyptian minorities and comes from an impoverished background, their situation becomes even more complicated.[19] The discrimination they encounter from state and public institutions, as well as society at large, is affected by the intersection of their multiple identities. Therefore, they are vulnerable to prejudice and abuse simultaneously as transgender individuals, Roma or Egyptian, sex workers, HIV-positive individuals, and/or being economically disadvantaged, with the vast majority being unable to access medical or any other type of state and public services.[20]

The same situation is mirrored when it comes to other basic rights such as access to education, housing, and employment, with roughly 30% of LGBTQ+ individuals "being unable to complete compulsory education because of discrimination and economic challenges."[21] Many LGBTQ+ youth from disadvantaged economic backgrounds are forced to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation from both their families and the school environment, not only to avoid harassment and abuse but also to prevent the risk of being cast out from their homes. The fact that they are minors further complicates their situation because, even if a safety shelter has space available, their legal guardians have the power and authority to make them return home, which can override the shelter's efforts to help. Fearing further abuse and threats from their families or legal guardians, these young people might hide the true reason for their abuse when dealing with other institutions that may become involved in these situations, such as the state police, by hiding their gender identity or sexual orientation to avoid additional harassment. Fear and distrust toward state institutions can also impact the situation.

Moreover, despite the lack of available data on employment and workplace discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals, securing a job is already difficult.[22] Underage LGBTQ+ individuals find it nearly impossible to find employment or support themselves, often forcing them to either continue living with abusive parents or legal guardians or pushing them toward illegal activities such as sex work or drug dealing for survival, which ultimately expose them to even greater risks. In a semi-authoritarian country characterized by corruption and ineffective labor unions, workplace protection is not guaranteed even for formally employed LGBTQ+ adults.

Nonetheless, the most recent report from the regional LGBTI Equal Rights Association (LGBTI ERA) on the Western Balkans (WB6) and Türkiye highlights Albania's significant progress from 2015 to 2023, including increased support for LGBTQ+ individuals and communities, greater interaction, and higher acceptance of same-sex partnerships.[23] However, it also indicates that the majority of the population continues to view LGBTQ+ individuals as "sick," focusing more on "healing" than acceptance.[24] At the same time, there is a refusal to embrace the open expression of LGBTQ+ identity in public, to grant equal rights, and to acknowledge diversity in society, often leading to isolation, feelings of abandonment, and anxiety and depression among LGBTQ+ individuals.

What Often Goes Unreported in Official Accounts

In 2024, a few grieving community members shared news of the death by suicide of a member of the Albanian LGBTQ+ who was in their early 20s on social media. A black and white picture of the deceased, smiling and looking at the camera, circulated for a few days alongside heartfelt messages from friends and acquaintances. Then life went back to "normal," carrying with it the unspoken burden of mental health challenges and the risk of suicide among LGBTQ+ members.

In a society where mental health is rarely discussed and seeking help from therapists, psychologists, or psychiatrists is often stigmatized, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression are frequently overlooked or dismissed. With insufficient awareness about the importance of mental health care, and under a patriarchal culture that deems emotional expression a weakness – especially for men, the LGBTQ+ community in Albania is among the most profoundly affected. The needs of the LGBTQ+ community exceed the capacity of civil society organizations like Aleanca LGBT+, drug/HIV prevention groups such as Aksion Plus in Tirana, and counseling hotlines such as SOS LGBT, which provide free counseling and therapy sessions with mental health professionals. Furthermore, the lack of institutional and cultural awareness about mental health issues exacerbates the situation.

In 2021, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in Albania, in collaboration with civil society groups and with support from the EU, introduced the National Action Plan for LGBTI Persons in Albania for the period 2021-2027.[25, 26] This is the third plan of its kind developed by the ministry in collaboration with various international organizations and approved by the Albanian Parliament in 2021. Its aim is to create a safer environment for LGBTQ+ individuals in Albania and advance progress in areas such as health care, education, law enforcement, and social services.[27] Nevertheless, despite the existence of such plans – which remain largely unimplemented beyond official documents and presentations hailed as democratic advancements – the reality on the ground is quite different.

Exposed to various forms of abuse at home and outside, feeling abandoned by state institutions, struggling economically, and suffering in silence as a result, many members of the LGBTQ+ community in Albania are desperately trying to find a way out.

In early 2024, E. Gj., a 41-year-old middle-class member of the LGBTQ+ community, was attacked steps from his Tirana apartment, suffering a beating that left him with a broken jaw and teeth requiring multiple surgeries and continued treatment. Details of the attack, which occurred after multiple incidents of intimidation and attempted assaults, were circulated among the community and its allies but was not reported to the media, as the victim feared that increased visibility could lead to further assaults.

The Albanian media is also complicit in fostering homophobia, division, and hatred in the country. A study conducted by the non-governmental organization PRO-LGBT in collaboration with the German Embassy in Tirana monitored Albanian audiovisual media from March to August 2020, analyzing 109 TV shows and 293 written articles, to find that women, the LGBTQ+ community, and Roma and Egyptian communities are the most frequently targeted groups for hate speech.[28, 29]

This kind of hatred extends beyond words and manifests in concrete actions. For instance, during the 2024 Pride march, despite the presence of police, one participant – a woman – was physically attacked by a young man who threw a stone at her. Tirana Pride 2024 was followed by a wave of disinformation and hate speech targeting the LGBTQ+ community. This began with the conservative "Pro-Family" movement in Albania and subsequently spread through online and mainstream media, inciting threats against community members, and legitimizing violence against them.[30]

In E. Gj's case, despite the victim having reported the violence to the police, law enforcement failed to act effectively against the attackers and provide adequate protection. The authorities' constant inaction, as well as the fear of another homophobic attack, prompted E. Gj to relocate to another neighborhood in the capital and later emigrate. The urgent need to relocate, coupled with the financial strain of ongoing medical treatment, resulted in economic hardships.

When someone from the middle class living in the city center can endure an attack like this, one can only imagine the vulnerabilities faced by other community members from poor backgrounds with no additional support systems residing in the country's periphery. Like E. Gj., many have opted to permanently leave the country and migrate to LGBTQ+-friendly EU nations, where they can pursue more normal lives while also considering the challenges posed by the EU member states' migration systems and other difficulties related to their status as foreigners and migrants. This is currently taking place in a Europe where public discourse against migrants is rising and far-right parties and

groups are gaining power and influence, as seen for example in countries like Germany, France, and Austria.

Meanwhile, institutions such as the Ministry of Health and Social Protection in Albania attempt to portray the ongoing violence against LGBTQ+ individuals as a cultural issue rather than a structural one. By doing so, they evade responsibility for failing to implement commitments like the National Action Plan for LGBTI Persons in Albania, as well as non-discrimination laws and international human rights treaties that Albania has ratified.

Albania has ratified 55 international human rights conventions, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which, among other things, mandate nondiscrimination and equality for LGBTQ+ individuals. The government's resistance to legal adjustments that could advance the rights of the members of the LGBTQ+ community in Albania is in direct breach of these conventions and could impede Albania's progress to becoming a member of the EU.[31]

Additionally, the ruling majority, represented by the Socialist Party of Albania (SPA), after 11 years in power, continues to sidestep LGBTQ+ issues. It is crucial for politicians and institutional leaders to actively confront these concerns, acknowledge the hostile environment and rhetoric targeting the LGBTQ+ community, and provide formal and institutional backing for awareness campaigns while advocating for messages of tolerance.

Despite the SPA's efforts to present a progressive image on the international stage, it has, during its decade in power, contributed to growing inequality by enacting regressive policies, disproportionately impacting the most vulnerable of the already precarious, like members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as Roma and Egyptian communities.[32] Moreover, this comes amid a context where, as per the 2023 local elections results, Albania has *de facto* regressed to a one-party state.[33]

Conclusion

Despite progress in basic areas such as increased acknowledgement and greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals in Albania compared to a decade ago, the community – along with other minorities like the Roma and Egyptian communities – remains in a highly vulnerable state. Transgender individuals in particular are disproportionately affected by these challenges, unable to find work or access health care, housing, or other essential services. The situation is even more critical for LGBTQ+ youth who lack support systems. Moreover, the intersection of multiple social identities further complicates one's situation, as factors such as race, ethnicity, ability, and socio-economic background become crucial determinants of one's opportunity to live with dignity in a developing country like Albania, which offers limited support to its citizens, and even more so to people belonging to minorities and disadvantaged groups.

Perceived as "sick" by much of society, facing widespread rejection, and enduring abuse and violations on various socio-structural levels, LGBTQ+ individuals in Albania are forced to live in constant fear. Consequently, they feel the need to hide their identities, isolate themselves, and lead double lives, which might lead to anxiety and depression, as well as exposure to various risks. Many desperately seek escape, with only a few fortunate individuals among those migrating finding refuge outside Albania.

Despite its status as an EU candidate country that has committed to various international human rights conventions that also include nondiscrimination of LGBTQ+ individuals, Albania has failed to ensure protection, safety, equality, and equitable inclusion for LGBTQ+ people by failing to adhere either to international human rights treaties or its own nondiscrimination laws. The current regime, led by the SPA and Prime Minister Edi Rama, who has been in power for 10 years, continues to resist updating outdated, patriarchal, and heteronormative legislation.

In addition, those few inclusive policies that the government and Parliament have adopted, like the National Action Plan for LGBTI Persons in Albania, remain largely populist and unimplemented. Therefore, external financial and political support for LGBTQ+ advocacy groups in Albania remain crucial, as these organizations have effectively assumed the role of state institutions in delivering essential assistance to community members in the absence of adequate state support.

Effective cooperation among the government, state institutions, and the LGBTQ+ community in Albania, along with adherence to the rule of law, international human rights conventions, and Albania's commitment to the EU membership path, cannot be achieved in a context marked by corruption and rising authoritarianism. Respect for human rights, including LGBTQ+ rights, requires democracy and freedom as a condition for progress and prosperity. On the other hand, the ongoing and multifaceted efforts of the LGBTQ+ community in Albania and the Western Balkans are vital not only for the community's own pursuit of rights and liberation but also for advancing the democratization and broader liberation of the entire region.

Status of LGBTQ+ – Gresa Hasa



Gresa Hasa graduated in Political Science from the University of Tirana, Albania, and is completing a joint master's in Southeast European Studies, specializing in Law and Politics, at the University of Graz and Central European University in Vienna, Austria. She is the co-founder and Chief Editor of the Albanian feminist magazine *Shota*. With over a decade of experience as a grassroots feminist activist across Albania and the Western Balkans, Hasa has also worked in independent journalism and investigative reporting. Her writing covers politics, social issues, and culture. She brings expertise in Southeast European politics, focusing on elections, social movements, nationalism, authoritarianism, and foreign policy.

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