



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

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**O**n 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.<sup>1</sup> It was the first publicly celebrated LGBTQ+ wedding in Albania.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4, 5, 6</sup> 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.<sup>7, 8</sup>

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.<sup>9, 10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup>

Albania adopted the Law on Protection Against Discrimination in 2010 and introduced several amendments to the Criminal Code to strengthen protection for LGBTQ+ individuals.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

## 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.”<sup>17</sup> This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when organizations such as Aleanca LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ 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 LGBTQ+ 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.”<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> However, it also indicates that the majority of the population continues to view LGBTQ+ individuals as “sick,” focusing more on “healing” than acceptance.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25, 26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28, 29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, this comes amid a context where, as per the 2023 local elections results, Albania has *de facto* regressed to a one-party state.<sup>33</sup>

## 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.



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