

Albania

TRANSITIONAL OR HYBRID REGIME

46
/100

Democracy Percentage	45.83/100
Democracy Score	3.75/7

LAST YEAR'S DEMOCRACY PERCENTAGE & STATUS

46 /100 **Transitional or Hybrid Regime**

The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest.

The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year. The Democracy Percentage, introduced in 2020, is a translation of the Democracy Score to the 0-100 scale, where 0 equals least democratic and 100 equals most democratic.



Score changes in 2022

- No score changes in 2022.

Executive Summary

Albanian democracy was tested to its core in 2021 by the country's tenth multiparty parliamentary elections since the collapse of communism. The incumbent Socialist Party was reelected for a third term, a feat no political party had ever achieved in post-communist Albania, retaining 74 seats in the 140-seat Kuvendi, Albania's unicameral parliament. ¹ However, much of the pre- and postelection public discourse was filled with mutual recriminations and divisive rhetoric by leaders of the main political parties and the president, which led to incidents of public intimidation, injuries, and even deaths during the electoral campaigns. ²

The parliamentary elections, based on the Electoral Code amended in 2020, included several novelties, such as electronic voting in several polling centers as part of a pilot project and preferential voting on party lists. The amendments allowed party leaders to run for the parliament in up to four districts at a time. ³ This granted them an unfair advantage compared to other candidates ⁴ and is at odds with the democratic principle of equal opportunity.

The parliamentary elections were generally well administered. The Central Election Commission was able to introduce new technological tools to identify voters on election day, and new counting technologies were used in various polling centers. ⁵ However, the integrity of the election was not fully intact, as credible allegations of vote buying, intimidation, and violence were reported. The Special Prosecution Office against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) announced on May 6 that it had opened some 35 criminal proceedings, most regarding vote buying. ⁶ The opposition Democratic Party created a unit called "Protect the Vote" to counter vote buying activities ⁷ during the election, although this was seen as a paramilitary-style operation and potentially illegal since parallel structures to the police and army are prohibited by Albanian law. ⁸ Yet it speaks to broader issues of public distrust in institutions that Albania has yet to provide for its citizens, namely, a functional liberal democratic system in which Albanians may freely choose their representatives without pressure or intimidation.

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, President Ilir Meta openly campaigned against the incumbent Socialist Party and called for citizens to use violence if their vote was compromised. ⁹ Following Meta's outbursts, the United States (US) and

the European Union (EU) urged the country's main political leaders to "exercise restraint" and "clearly reject violence." ¹⁰ The Albanian presidency is largely ceremonial and generally understood to be apolitical. However, Meta went further to openly accuse the U.S. and EU of helping the prime minister and Socialist Party chairman, Edi Rama, to capture the state and the judicial system. ¹¹ In recent years, and especially during 2021, factions within the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI, founded by Meta in 2004) and the Democratic Party have stepped up their harsh rhetoric towards the U.S. and EU, claiming they are interfering in Albania's sovereignty and internal affairs. ¹²

This rhetoric of disapproval towards the U.S. and EU relates to the significant political and financial foreign investment in various new law-enforcement bodies and the justice system's vetting process, which has raised high expectations for investigations into abuse of power and corruption by current and former public officials—for example, a former environment minister who embezzled millions in a public tender for waste incinerators. Following the elections, in June, the Kuvendi secured 104 votes to impeach President Meta for allegedly violating 16 constitutional articles, and for inciting violence during the 2021 parliamentary elections. ¹³ (The Constitutional Court found in February 2022 that Meta's actions did not amount to a grave violation of the constitution, ¹⁴ which is the legal threshold for discharging a sitting president. ¹⁵) Although the parliament may elect a new president as soon as May 2022, since Meta's term ends in July 2022, ¹⁶ the clash among the president, the government, and the parliament has further contributed to the already highly polarized political climate.

During 2021, several leaks occurred that comprised the personal data of thousands of Albanian citizens. In April, before the elections, the online news outlet Lapsi.al reported that a database containing sensitive personal data of 910,000 citizens had allegedly been obtained by the Socialist Party ¹⁷ from e-Albania, a government portal for the delivery of public services. ¹⁸ The Socialist Party initially denied the existence of the database, but PM Rama later acknowledged that his party, since 2009, had maintained an internal database by collecting information from door to door in a so-called system of patronage. ¹⁹ Although no investigation was launched into this "system of patronage," or more generally into how political parties obtain and handle citizens' personal data, ²⁰ SPAK ordered the seizure of electronic equipment of journalists at Lapsi.al. This action was deemed improper by the European Court of

Human Rights and the High Court of Albania, which ruled that journalists should not disclose their sources of information to SPAK unless the authority had already exhausted all available investigative tools before claiming access to journalists' data.

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The data breach and aftermath show that Albania has not yet taken seriously its own laws on protecting citizens' personal data **22** while also underscoring the challenging environment for journalists **23** and civil society activists in the country. Furthermore, the authorities' overreach and seizure of electronic equipment without due process or proper care for the rule of law further erodes citizens' trust in the country's newly reformed justice system.

The main opposition Democratic Party experienced political turmoil in second half of 2021, amid power struggles between Lulzim Basha (who resigned as chairman in March 2022) and Sali Berisha (former chairman and former prime minister and president), thereby leaving the actions and policies of the Socialist Party-led government free of scrutiny. The power struggle has been ongoing since Basha expelled Berisha from the Democratic Party following the U.S. State Department's public designation in May that Berisha had engaged in corrupt acts that undermine Albanian democracy. **24**

In October, the EU published its 2021 Enlargement Progress Report on Albania **25** and called on EU member states to greenlight the first intergovernmental conference to officially launch accession talks with Albania, as all preconditions had been met since March 2020. **26** However, the intergovernmental was not held during the year, and the integration process has stalled. The EU is financing a number of projects to support Albania's institutional capacity-building, particularly in the areas of rule of law and anticorruption; however, the European Court of Auditors published a special report (in January 2022) on "EU support for the rule of law in the Western Balkans" and found that such support and funding have had little impact on advancing fundamental rule of law reforms due to insufficient political will and a lack of engagement, including in Albania. **27**

The EU's anticorruption and rule of law support, and the U.S. State Department's public designations, **28** should be understood in the wider context of international foreign policy goals towards the Western Balkans. The desire is to have a partner in Albania who adheres to democratic norms, **29** not problematic leaders who generate

artificial political crises that the U.S. and EU are called upon to mediate. **30** If these international anticorruption efforts and public designations are taken more seriously by Albania’s political parties, law-enforcement agencies, and judicial system, it could provide impetus for further domestic reforms. However, encouraging political parties to take responsibility for their own reform and to tackle allegations of abuse of power and corruption within their own ranks has proven to be very difficult.

At a Glance

In Albania, national governance is democratic yet dominated by clientelistic party politics. Elections are generally competitive, but they are frequently marred by voting buying, manipulation, voter fraud, and other shortcomings. The civic sector plays a somewhat active role in public discourse and interests, but it suffers from inadequate funding and not being properly included in policy consultations as required by law. The media is partly independent and offers some level of scrutiny of public officeholders, but most outlet owners use their media platforms to lobby the government and political parties. Local self-governance is democratic but seriously underfunded and unfit to provide adequate services for citizens. The judiciary is under an ongoing vetting process until the end of 2024 and, therefore, only partly functional; since the vetting process began, a great deal of hype has raised expectations that the justice system will be more effective and independent, but it has yet to show concrete evidence of acting freely. Corruption is still widespread and causes dysfunction in the different branches of government, although new law-enforcement agencies established since 2019 are showing encouraging results in combating corruption and organized crime.

National Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts	
Considers the democratic character of the governmental system; and the independence, effectiveness, and accountability of the legislative and executive branches.	3.25 / 7.00

- The year 2021 was highly polarized and filled with numerous politically charged events in Albania, most revolving around the regular elections to the Kuvendi, the country’s 140-seat, unicameral parliament. The elections featured vicious campaigns against political parties, activists, reporters, and civil society actors, all fueled with discriminatory language, misogyny, intimidation, threats, and even

violence. After the elections, four topics dominated the political discourse: the power struggle and infighting among Democratic Party **31** leadership; massive leaks of citizens' personal data in April **32** and December; **33** the impeachment of President Ilir Meta; **34** and an embezzlement scandal over a public tender for waste incinerators (see "Corruption"). **35**

- On April 25, Albanian voters went to the polls to elect a new parliament for 2021–25. Prime Minister Edi Rama's Socialist Party won 74 of 140 seats in the Kuvendi and an unprecedented third consecutive term. The Socialist Party's campaign message to voters stressed that Rama had raised hundreds of millions of dollars in support for reconstruction efforts following the earthquake in November 2019 and rolled out the mass COVID-19 vaccine program. The opposition's message mostly focused on accusing Rama of mismanagement and corruption.
- The new parliamentary composition includes 10 parties: the Socialist Party (74 seats); the Democratic Party and its conservative allies (59 seats); the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI, 4 seats); and the Social Democratic Party (3 seats). All opposition parties claimed they would take part fully in parliamentary proceedings and not resign en masse (as in 2019) or boycott the parliament. **36** However, the Democratic Party struggled under a huge rift after leader Lulzim Basha expelled former leader Sali Berisha from the party following the U.S. State Department's public designation of Berisha as a figure engaged in corrupt acts that undermine Albanian democracy. This power struggle and infighting caused a leadership and legitimacy crisis within the party as the two men held separate party assemblies (Berisha on December 11 **37** and Basha on December 18) to make statutory changes to the party organization, aimed primarily at ousting each other. **38**
- The new government took office on September 18; the cabinet is overwhelmingly represented by women ministers (12 out of 17), **39** which puts Albania among the top five countries in the world with a majority of women in government. Since the government consists mostly of women, there were hopes from civil society that women's issues would gain more attention, given that domestic violence and sexual assault **40** remain major issues in Albania and public institutions have demonstratively failed to protect their well-being. **41**
- COVID-19 restrictions continued to complicate interactions between the different branches of government and citizens. **42** In some cases, these restrictions were misused to bypass scrutiny and transparency in adopting new

laws. **43** For instance, in June, the Kuvendi adopted a set of laws about nongovernmental organizations and their financial affairs, **44** but civil society recommendations and concerns were not taken into account. **45** Despite this, civil society organizations contributed actively in 2021 to important legal and policy proposals. For example, groups collected 20,000 signatures to propose a law on the creation of a National Sex Offender Registry. **46** They also helped to develop the 2019–23 Civil Society Road Map **47** and the first-ever National Action Plan 2021–27 for LGBT+ issues in Albania (see “Civil Society”). **48**

Electoral Process 1.00–7.00 pts

Examines national executive and legislative elections, the electoral framework, the functioning of multiparty systems, and popular participation in the political process.

4.25
/7.00

- The Central Election Commission (CEC) registered a total of 1,871 candidates from 46 political parties and 5 independents to run across 12 districts in the 2021 parliamentary elections, held on April 25. **49** Among the Kuvendi’s 140 seats, representation ranges from 3 mandates for Kukës to 36 for the capital Tirana; due to demographic changes, Tirana gained 2 seats while Dibra and Gjirokastra lost 1 seat each. **50**
- The CEC, despite some shortcomings, managed the elections well and showed a degree of independence by calling out government officials who breached campaign rules in using state resources. **51** The officials involved did not acknowledge the allegations, but in the first cabinet meeting on September 18, Prime Minister Rama called for government officials not to use state resources for political party engagements. **52** Reports by OSCE-ODIHR **53** and the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations (ENEMO) **54** pointed to a number of cases where officials misused state resources during the campaign, thereby conferring an advantage to ruling parties over opposition parties. Overall voter turnout was low at 46.33 percent. **55**
- The electoral campaigns were marked by isolated yet serious political violence. On April 20, a man was shot a Democratic Party campaign office by an unknown assailant. On April 21, a member of the Socialist Party was shot and killed during a clash between supporters of various parties. **56**
- The CEC’s deployment of new technologies in requiring electronic voter identification on election day and the use of electronic voting and counting in

some regions ⁵⁷ improved the technical quality of the voting process. However, not every citizen had the right to vote under the 2020 Electoral Code—in particular, citizens living abroad, people with disabilities, and those who were hospitalized. ⁵⁸ This raised serious concerns over the number of voters disenfranchised during the 2021 parliamentary elections, given that around 1.4 million Albanians currently live abroad. ⁵⁹

- Political party financing during the elections was ambiguous and at odds with best practices; the CEC only approved the rules and procedures for submitting final reports after the electoral campaign had started, causing confusion and room for abuse. ⁶⁰ Still, most parties seemed to follow the rule for spending and respected the financial caps of 167.5 million LEK per political party (\$1.5 million) and 27.9 million LEK (\$260,000) for independent candidates. ⁶¹
- However, the 2020 Electoral Code and campaign finance rules did not regulate political advertising online or on social media. ⁶² And since the 2021 parliamentary elections took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was more focus on advertising and campaigning online, especially on Facebook, than in any previous election cycle. An investigation by BIRN/Balkan Insight estimated that the two main parties spent nearly €6.5 million ⁶³ for advertising; their extraordinary presence on social media gave them a clear advantage in reaching out to voters compared to other parties and independent candidates. ⁶⁴
- For the first time, Albania’s Commissioner for Anti-Discrimination, in consultation with political parties, drew up a code of conduct called the “No Hate Alliance” to discourage discrimination and hate speech and promote greater tolerance during the 2021 parliamentary elections. However, women and a number of minority candidates were subjected to verbal attacks during the electoral season. ⁶⁵

Civil Society 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses the organizational capacity and financial sustainability of the civic sector; the legal and political environment in which it operates; the functioning of trade unions; interest group participation in the policy process; and the threat posed by antidemocratic extremist groups.

4.75
/7.00

- Albania on paper appears to have a vibrant civil society environment, as there are approximately 11,500 registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). However, the number of active NGOs is very low because most rely on foreign

donors, and they face intimidation, harassment, derogatory media campaigns, and lawsuits, especially when their activities are critical towards political, business, and media players. For instance, Transparency International, in collaboration with a civil society organization (CSO) based in Albania, published a study on “state capture and corruption” ⁶⁶ in 2021; in response, the Albanian co-authors received derogatory media campaigns, the names of their spouses and family members were shared by several outlets, and the authors’ independence was questioned due to their political preference and partners’ workplace affiliation, ⁶⁷ all in an effort to diminish the study’s findings.

- Some NGOs and CSOs faced greater challenges than usual in 2021 since the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and 2019 earthquake shrank the civic sector and funding. ⁶⁸ In light of this, civil society actors made a number of recommendations to the country’s National Council for Civil Society to improve the civil space, in particular, to redirect more funds and strengthen its legal status against defamation lawsuits and harassment. However, by year’s end, no meaningful actions had been taken to implement the recommendations. ⁶⁹
- Thanks to the EU accession preconditions requirement, the civic sector enjoys a special legal status to be included in consultations when laws are drafted. However, on numerous occasions, civil society actors have not been included. In December, for instance, the Ministry of Justice and High Judicial Council presented a proposal for a new judicial map, ⁷⁰ proposing to reduce the number of courts of first instance from 29 to 12 and to create a single Appeals Court based in the capital Tirana (down from the current six appeals courts). ⁷¹ Similarly, a number of sub-laws regarding the judiciary were adopted by the Kuvendi. ⁷² On both occasions, civil society groups and actors were not consulted, ⁷³ although the above proposals would have major ramifications for citizens’ access to justice, which is already limited in Albania ⁷⁴ (see “Judicial Framework and Independence”).
- The LGBT+ community continued to receive threats and derogatory media campaigns during the year. A couple who wanted to register their children under their names were denied because same-sex couples are not recognized as parents under Albanian law. ⁷⁵ LGBT+ Albanians are unable to establish civil partnerships or get married, are not eligible to adopt, and cannot change their gender markers on official documents. ⁷⁶ As a result, as much as 90 percent of LGBT+ Albanians are actively considering leaving the country due to the discrimination they face, according to a study by the nonprofit service

organization Streha. **77** LGBT+ and other human rights activists have lobbied for the laws to be changed; meanwhile, Xheni Karaj, a leading Albanian LGBT+ activist, was subjected to homophobic slurs and threats during a TV debate about LGBT+ rights. **78** Similarly, several TV hosts have stated on-air that LGBT+ Albanians should be subjected to violence or killed. **79** The Norwegian Helsinki Committee **80** called on state authorities to investigate these threats and take action to protect the LGBT+ community, yet no officials nor the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) sanctioned the TV shows for inciting hatred and violence.

Independent Media 1.00-7.00 pts

Examines the current state of press freedom, including libel laws, harassment of journalists, and editorial independence; the operation of a financially viable and independent private press; and the functioning of the public media.

3.50
/7.00

- The year 2021 was challenging for journalists due to threats, harassment, and dreadful working conditions. According to the Union of Albanian Journalists (UAJ), there are about 45 TV and 800 online media outlets operating nationwide and receiving funding from abroad, including financial support from Russia, Iran, China, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Italy—or from organized crime, especially online outlets. **81** There were about 5,970 journalists working under contract, and 1,760 working without contracts. About 80 percent of reporters are under 35 and earn less than \$300 per month, and almost 48 percent of wages were delayed 2–6 months in 2021. **82** These harsh working conditions and job insecurity are strategies routinely used by media owners to limit editorial independence. **83**
- Approximately eight people control the majority of the media market in Albania **84** and use these platforms to lobby their interests and maintain close ties with political parties. They also rely on blackmail or discredit persons who speak out against their interests or the political parties they support. Albania's market concentration poses a high risk to media pluralism and independence. This was clearly displayed during the 2021 parliamentary elections, where most news broadcasts used edited or prerecorded footage supplied by political parties. The OSCE-ODIHR raised concerns over such practices in its report on the 2021 elections, **85** noting that the use of prerecorded tapes or live footage from

politicians' own social media accounts may result in a lack of objective coverage of contestants, blurring the lines between editorial content and political advertising. ⁸⁶

- Albanian media content continued to worsen in 2021, with an increase in the number of TV shows that mostly share opinions without evidence-based or fact-checked content. The country's top TV channels offered unlimited airtime to antivax conspiracy theorists, ⁸⁷ which undermined the state's vaccine program. Furthermore, countless conspiracy and misinformation stories ⁸⁸ were spread on unlimited platforms during the year; the two leading stories were about "the U.S. public designation of Berisha" ⁸⁹ and "Albania hosting Afghan refugees," ⁹⁰ which led to violence at demonstrations ⁹¹ and threats against journalists. ⁹² Albania is a prime example of public and political discourse based on "post-truth" ⁹³ and "political gaslighting," ⁹⁴ wherein deceptive and manipulative information is used to destabilize and disorient public opinion on major issues.
- Several journalists and reporters faced harassment in 2021, including Andi Bushati and Armand Shkullaku of Lapsi.al; ⁹⁵ after their exposé about the Socialist Party's "system of patronage" and misuse of personal data, they faced harassment and their devices ⁹⁶ were seized by SPAK, which the courts later ruled ⁹⁷ to be improper and put their sources at serious risk. Ergys Gjencaj and Klodiana Lala of News24 were detained unlawfully ⁹⁸ for filming a failed anti-drug operation by the police. ⁹⁹ And Anila Hoxha of Top Channel was pushed downhill by the police while reporting on a murder investigation. ¹⁰⁰ Although the UAJ has called for protection and better treatment of journalists, there were no improvements made in the working environment for journalists during the year.

Local Democratic Governance 1.00-7.00 pts

Considers the decentralization of power; the responsibilities, election, and capacity of local governmental bodies; and the transparency and accountability of local authorities.

4.50
/7.00

- The Kuvendi adopted territorial-administrative reform ¹⁰¹ in 2014 to reduce the number of local governments from 384 to 61 municipalities. ¹⁰² The objectives were to improve citizens' engagement with local democracy as well as increase the transparency and financial independence of local self-government. However,

the reform has not met the envisaged objectives to date, and local governance in Albania remains highly dependent on the central level for financial support.

- In 2021, the Association of Municipalities issued a report assessing the impact of the local government reform ¹⁰³ since it came into force. The main findings were that municipalities still struggle for survival, and some are on the brink of bankruptcy due to inefficient management and trouble collecting revenues. Furthermore, the earthquake in 2019 struck 15 municipalities, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed even more municipalities nearly into bankruptcy. ¹⁰⁴
- Local financial struggles were also reported by the International Monetary Fund, suggesting that municipalities received about 1.2 percent of Albania's GDP in 2020, approximately 4.5 times less than other Western Balkan countries. ¹⁰⁵ The Association of Municipalities has requested a doubling of financial aid from 1 percent to 2 percent of GDP from 2022. ¹⁰⁶ However, the central government claims that unless local governments improve transparency in their decision-making processes, they will not receive any financial upgrade. On the other hand, the Association of Municipalities claims that the central government often interferes with municipal budgets, thus making financial planning very challenging. What can be observed is that since the local-government reform came into force in 2015, municipalities have continued to lack sufficient financial resources to function independently and fail to engage with citizens effectively or democratically.
- In July, the Constitutional Court of Albania asked the Venice Commission for an opinion on a case presented by the Association of Albanian Municipalities to review the legality of the 2019 local elections. ¹⁰⁷ The case questioned whether the elections comported with liberal democratic standards and sought to void the results, since in 31 out of 61 municipalities there was only one candidate (from the Socialist Party) who ran unopposed, given that the main opposition party boycotted the 2019 elections altogether; as a result, the Socialist Party won in 60 municipalities. ¹⁰⁸
- In October, the Venice Commission published its opinion and suggested that political plurality—a "*sine qua non* pre-condition of any democratic regime"—had been jeopardized in the 2019 local elections, but that the Constitutional Court should not intervene since it is not a legal matter if political parties decide to boycott elections. ¹⁰⁹ The Constitutional Court followed the Venice

Commission's opinion closely and issued its decision in December, ¹¹⁰ finding no legal issues regarding the 2019 local elections. ¹¹¹

- The municipalities of Shkodër, Dibër, Durrës, Vorë, Rrogozhinë, and Lushnjë have not had mayors for more than two years; following the Constitutional Court ruling not to invalidate the 2019 local election outcomes, special elections were set in these communities for 2022. ¹¹²

Judicial Framework and Independence 1.00-7.00 pts

Assesses constitutional and human rights protections, judicial independence, the status of ethnic minority rights, guarantees of equality before the law, treatment of suspects and prisoners, and compliance with judicial decisions.

3.25
/7.00

- During the year, Albania's judicial system continued the structural and institutional changes begun in 2016, in particular, the vetting process for judges and prosecutors, which is the main component of the justice reform yet has moved at a snail's pace. By the end of the year, out of 800 magistrates in Albania, 195 had passed the vetting process, 185 (including 118 judges and 67 prosecutors) had not passed; and 76 had resigned voluntarily. ¹¹³ Almost half of those who were dismissed could not justify their assets or had hidden their wealth, suggesting they had engaged in corrupt acts. The other half of the dismissed were done so based on lack of integrity or professionalism. ¹¹⁴
- The process was supposed to be completed by June 2022, but so far only about 60 percent of the 800 magistrates have been vetted. ¹¹⁵ This delay has created additional legal, social, and political challenges, especially regarding access to justice, as nearly 35,000 cases are pending adjudication in courts ¹¹⁶ due to the lack of magistrates.
- In September, the Socialist Party proposed constitutional and legal amendments to extend by an extra two years the terms of the transitional bodies in charge of conducting and implementing the vetting process. The parliamentary speaker requested an opinion from the Venice Commission on extending the mandate of the vetting institutions to ensure its constitutionality, and the Venice Commission opinion issued in December ¹¹⁷ supported the extended mandates of the vetting institutions.
- Throughout 2021, despite delays in the vetting process, some newly established judicial institutions were filled with new members: the Constitutional Court and

the High Court added new magistrates and are now partly up and running; the Special Prosecution Office against Organized Crime and Corruption (SPAK) also added new magistrates to its ranks; and in August, the first group of 34 investigators ¹¹⁸ joined the country's National Bureau of Investigation (NBI), after completing their training at the U.S. FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, ¹¹⁹ and are assigned to support SPAK in prosecuting cases related to organized crime and corruption.

- The vetting process delay and mounting number of cases waiting to be adjudicated have created distrust and a lack of confidence in the newly reformed justice system. At the same time, the reform has generated a lot of hype and high expectations that the newly established institutions—particularly SPAK and NBI, with its new team of investigators—will be able to combat corruption and organized crime at the highest levels in Albania. In its second year of operation, SPAK is already showing tangible results (see “Corruption”).

120

Corruption 1.00-7.00 pts

Looks at public perceptions of corruption, the business interests of top policymakers, laws on financial disclosure and conflict of interest, and the efficacy of anticorruption initiatives.

2.75
/ 7.00

- According to Transparency International's 2021 Corruption Perceptions Index, corruption continued to be a serious issue of concern in Albania, which dropped to 110th place out of 180 countries, falling six places compared to 2020. This negative perception was also identified in a national poll by Euronews Albania, which found that over 90 percent of Albanians perceive that corruption is widespread in the country. ¹²¹ Furthermore, the 2021 EU progress report for Albania singled out corruption as impeding the country's EU accession progress and a major contributing factor to citizens' low trust in all branches of government. ¹²²
- The perception of a high level of corruption was also confirmed by Albania's own public institutions on several occasions in 2021. The State Supreme Audit (KLSH), in its reporting, found approximately \$20 million in damages and losses to public finances in 2021, acknowledging that corruption played a large part in the mismanagement of public resources. ¹²³ KLSH filed charges against Interior Ministry officials after completing an audit of the ministry's accounts from 2018

to 2020; as a result, SPAK arrested members of the public procurement committee for allegedly rigging a public tender worth approximately \$26 million in 2020 and inflating costs for the supply of uniforms for Albanian police officers. **124**

- During the year, SPAK brought several cases against current and former public officials who allegedly engaged in corrupt acts: for example, the special prosecution office arrested officials from the Tirana Cadastral Agency and Land Registry on charges of passive corruption; **125** the mayor of Lushnje on charges of embezzlement in a public tender; **126** and former environment minister Leter Koka (2013–17) **127** on embezzlement charges for allegedly accepting a bribe of \$4.1 million related to waste incinerator projects. **128**
- Although the above arrests made by SPAK are still pending judgments in the courts, there were other encouraging high-profile cases that resulted in successful convictions on abuse of power and corrupt acts. In September, former attorney general Adriatik Llalla (2012–17) **129** was sentenced to two years in prison for abuse of power and hiding assets; the U.S. State Department also publicly designated Llalla for involvement in corrupt acts in 2018. **130** Llalla went on the lam but was arrested in Italy in December. **131**
- SPAK has announced that it plans to launch a number of investigations in 2022 of high-ranking public officials for engaging in corrupt acts. In 2021, the Special Court of Appeal for Corruption and Organized Crime gave the green light to reopen the investigation into the 2008 “Gërdec explosions” case in which 300 people were injured and 26 died; **132** this case allegedly involves a number of current and former high-ranking public officials. **133**

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Andi Hoxhaj, PhD, is a socio-legal scholar based at the University of Warwick in the UK and a Fellow of the Eutopia European University Young Leaders Academy. He teaches the European Union Law, Modern English Legal System, Constitutional Law, and Tort Law modules at the Warwick Law School. He is a recipient of the Warwick Award for Teaching Excellence 2021. Dr. Hoxhaj was awarded his PhD in 2017 at the University of Warwick. His research areas include corruption, the rule of law, good governance, civil society, European integration, and EU engagement in the Western Balkans. He is an author of a book entitled ‘The EU Anti-Corruption Policy: A Reflexive Governance

Approach (Routledge, 2020) and has a number of peer-reviewed articles published in leading academic journals on the rule of law, anti-corruption, academic freedom, EU engagement with the Western Balkans, and European Neighbourhood and Enlargement policy. In April 2018, Dr. Hoxhaj was awarded the British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award for a project entitled “The UK—Western Balkans post-Brexit.” His insight on corruption, good governance, EU enlargement, and the migration of young people in the Western Balkans were referred to in a UK parliamentary inquiry report “The UK and the future of the Western Balkans” in 2018. Dr Hoxhaj’s research on the Western Balkans are regularly quoted in leading international media, including the BBC, the Associated Press, the Washington Post, and Euronews. Dr. Hoxhaj is currently a re:constitution 2021/2022 Fellow carrying out a research project entitled “The Politics of the EU Rule of Law and Anti-Corruption Reform” at the Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden and the Max Planck Institute for Comparative Public Law and International Law in Germany.

Footnotes

- 1 “Albania: April 2021 Parliamentary Election Report”, National Democratic Institute, May 11, 2021. <https://www.ndi.org/publications/albania-april-2021-parliamentary-elect...>
- 2 Gjergj Erebara, “Politician’s Killing Stains Albania’s Turbulent Election Campaign”, Balkan Insight, April 22, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/04/22/local-politician-murdered-in-elbas...>
- 3 Party leaders could choose which seat they may hold if they gain more than one seat before the new Parliament is inaugurated; Edi Rama of the Socialist Party and Monika Kryemadhi of the LSI won seats in two different districts. However, this is somewhat a step forward, as in previous parliamentary elections political leaders could run in all 12 districts.
- 4 “ENEMO’s international observation mission for the 2021 Parliamentary Elections in Albania”, European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations, July 28, 2021, <http://www.enemo.eu/en/missions/albania-parliamentary-elections-2021/44...>
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